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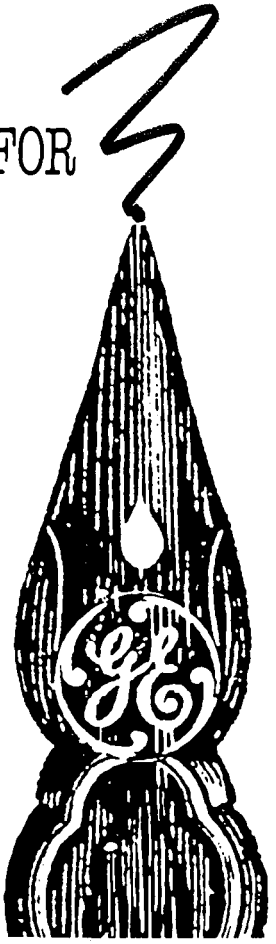

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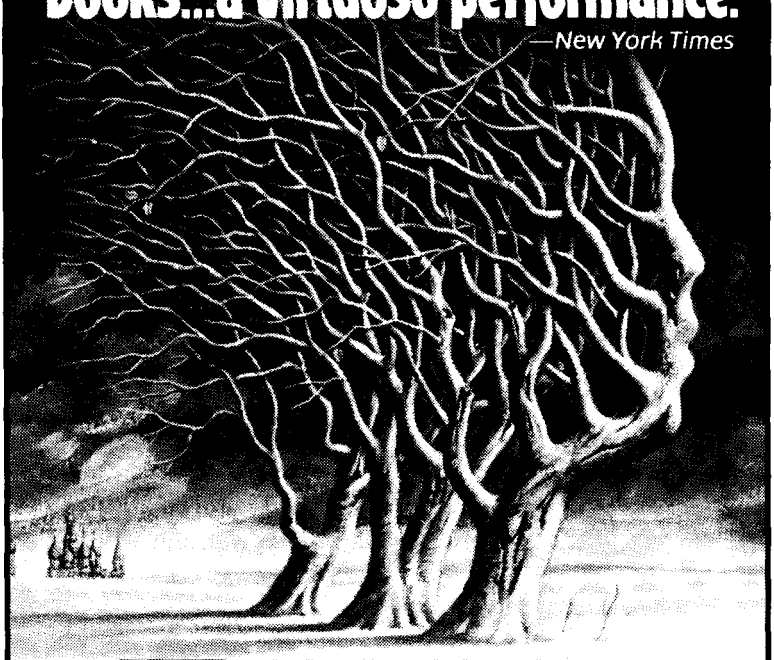

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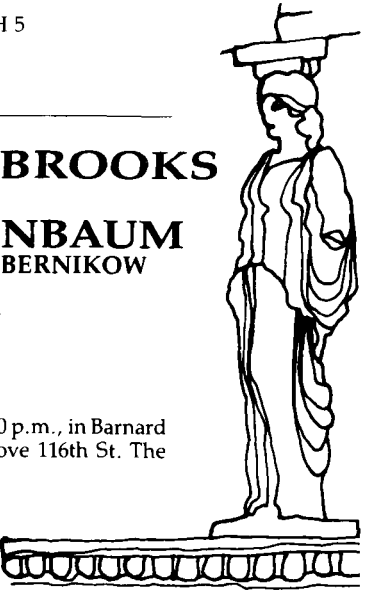

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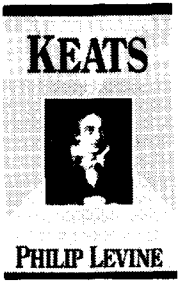

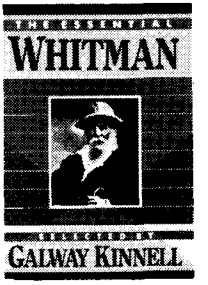

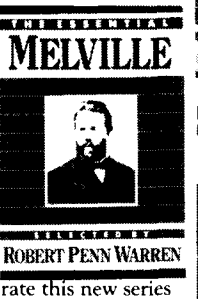

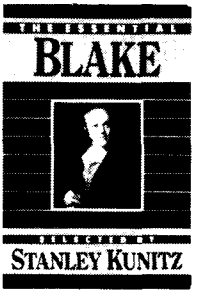

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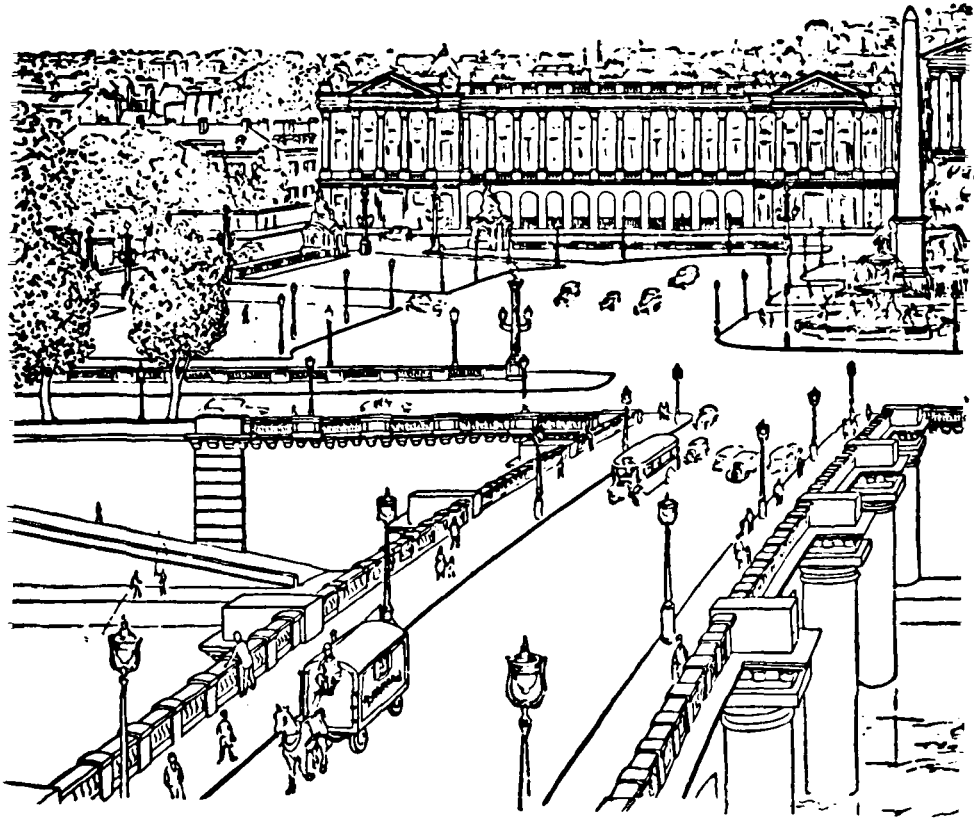

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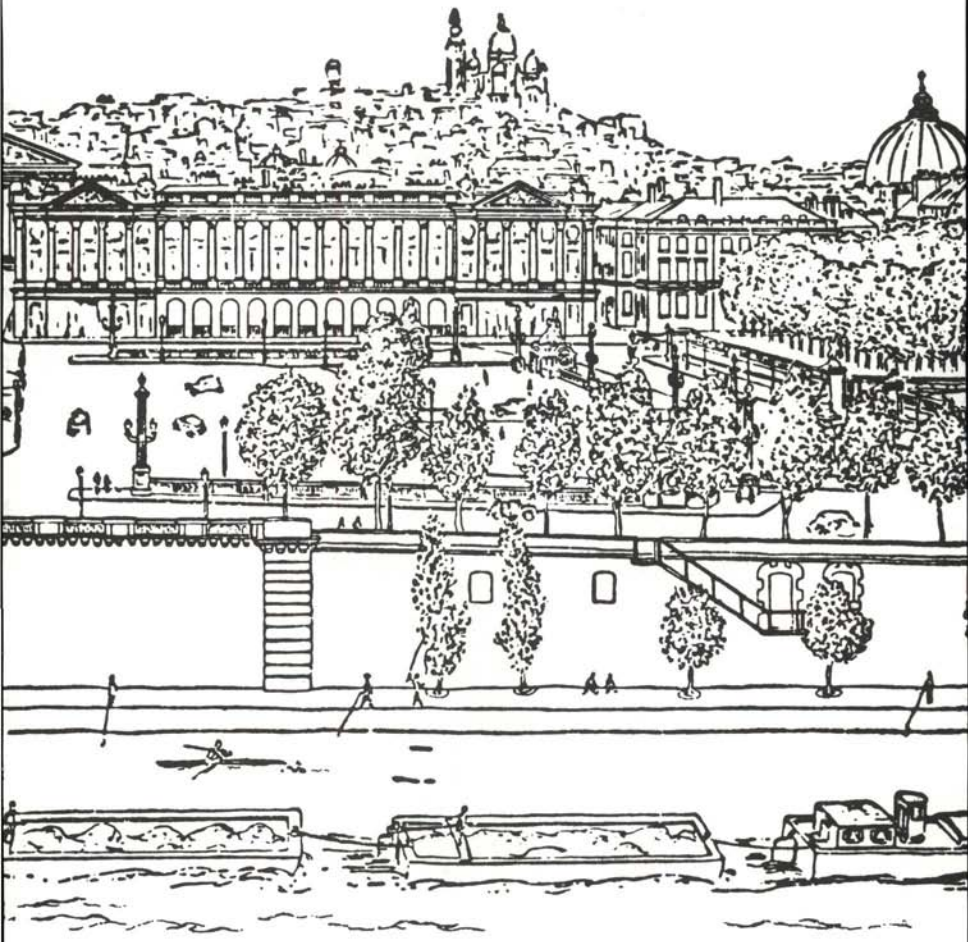

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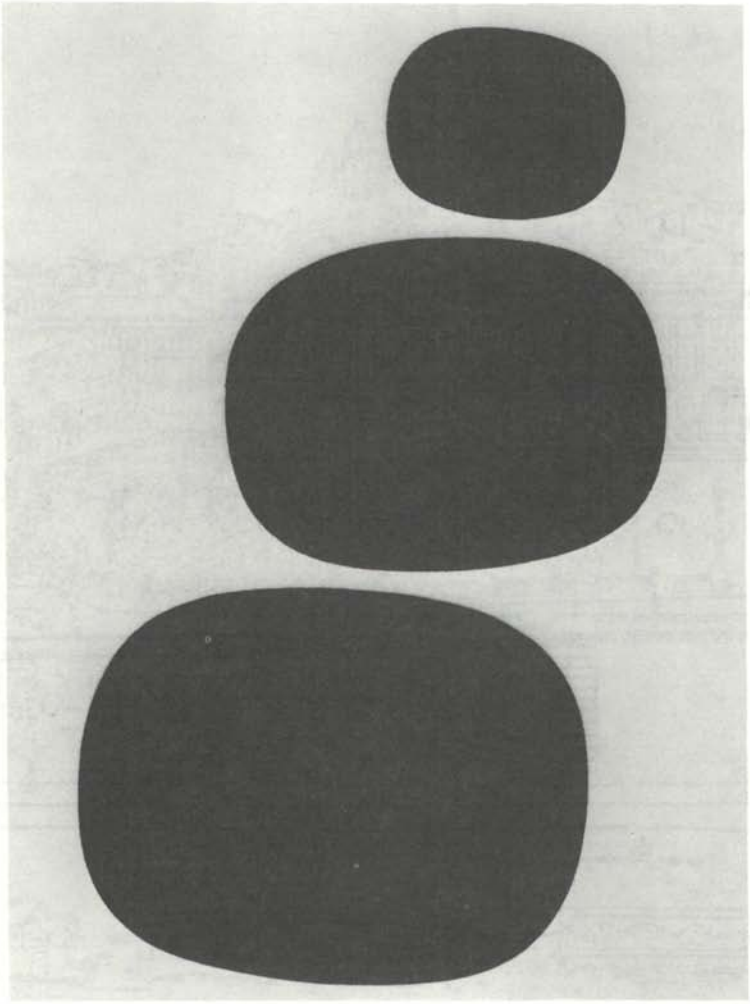

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The editors mourn the passing of Sinbad Vail, the founder and editor of *Points*, and a friend to this magazine in its early days.

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Where the Sea Used to Be

Rick Bass

They met before midnight at the house of the richest man in Mississippi, and left shortly with a dark old leather country doctor's satchel that was bulging with money, bulging as if trying to breathe, swollen like a dying fish's gills: they were unable to even shut it all the way. There wasn't a moon, and they had to drive slowly, because one of the dogs was sick, and the old man had to urinate every forty minutes, and the truck was old, because they did not want to appear conspicuous. They had coffee in Starkville, urinated in Columbus, and crossed over the state line of Alabama at dawn. The sun was orange and promising as they came down through the tall pines; no traffic was out on the road yet, and there was smoke in only a few of the chimneys, rising slow and straight. It was October.

"I like to be traveling at this time of day," Harry told Jack. Harry had slept between his stops, the entire drive. Soft fog was out over the lowest meadows; Holsteins, and Angus, grazed. It had rained in the night, lightly, before their arrival: that smell was in the air. The road was black and narrow, and wound down through the heavy trees and there was greenness, in the small meadows: cleared by hand, and mule, all stumps

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burned, the meadows had field stones stacked around their boundaries. There were old tool sheds.

"You can rip up those old nasty barns and make picture frames of 'em," Harry told Jack, and laughed. "People in the city'll pay money for those things." He eyed the occasional ancient sheds with a steady, labored look as they passed each one, pausing in his heavy breathing, not even hawking phlegm, so that Jack was alarmed into picturing them driving out into the field, hooking up to the porch or a window frame with a rope, and driving off, pulling the scatter of wood and building down like dominoes. Stacking the wood in the back of the truck. Driving on, deeper into the heart of Alabama, to enter, to take. Harry was seventy-two, the boss. The peace and freshness of the morning made Jack not mind anything. His life was set before him. The dogs awoke and began tumbling about in the back: jawing, yipping, fighting. The poor one feeling better.

The orange sun rose above the hills as they reached the Vernon city limits: trees, dark green, pines. Harry said he was hungry. They were on an expense account. He ate six eggs and three biscuits. Jack fed and watered the dogs, and scratched their ears. Dudley had said the dogs would be as valuable as the satchel. People still thought Dudley could find oil. It was the last hurrah.

The dogs had been purchased late the afternoon before from the Animal Rescue League, and were along because there was a man who was already working up in north Alabama, a man named Wallis Featherston, who had worked in a menial job for Dudley Estes for several years, but who was now on his own, taking small bits and pieces of leases and then telling his ideas to other, larger companies, larger than even Old Dudley—companies that Dudley wanted someday to equal: Shell, Phillips, Texaco—who would go in and buy the remaining leases in the prospect, and drill the wells, and Wallis would be able to participate for a percent or two or three. It was said that Wallis was getting his leases very cheaply, because he was country, like the people he was leasing from—bone raw and country, rusty and gravel, a people of cold winters, rainy springs, and hard farming—and Wallis had a dog that rode

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around with him everywhere. Wallis had a plane, too: he flew around, looking at things.

So they, Old Dudley, had decided to go with what worked. Old Dudley was sixty years old, a billionaire, and for some reason was chasing this ex-clerk: trying to catch up with him and pass him. Wallis was twenty-eight, and slept in a field, in his sleeping bag, or in the truck when it rained. He hadn't participated in a dry hole yet. He'd hit on thirteen straight wells. He had named his dog Dudley.

Jack ordered ham for breakfast. The sausages and hams were good, up in these hills. The farmers wore overalls and straw hats and were nasal, and still used mules, red championship ones from Tennessee. The country was too tough for tractors. There were also sawmills, a few.

Jack smiled at one of the waitresses. None of the girls were pretty, and they all looked the same, like a hundred plain sisters. He would find one, though, an outsider, passing through, like himself. She would be smitten with the promise of youth and his existence. There was a heavy chain around the satchel, padlocked. The key to the lock was on a necklace over Jack's chest. The key against his skin felt like a woman's hand, sometimes; the heat. It made him dizzy. He wanted to do good, for Dudley. He wanted to do so good. The dogs barked, and played, outside. People went to the window, and asked what kind they were.

Wallis sat out in the field where he camped, with his maps in his lap, checking leases. A woman brought him some lunch: chicken, cream corn, biscuits, all of it still hot. It was in a straw basket with a cloth over the top. People were discovering the basin: it hadn't been drilled for over seventy years. The day was bright, and there was newness; you could smell oil in the air, too. No one knew where it was coming from—there were no wells in the area, hunters had never found any seeps along the creeks—but it had the heady smell of live oil, black. Dudley had drilled eight dry holes in the little valley. Wallis loved to lunch there often. He had saved the dog Dudley from being killed by a bird hunter: speechless, furious at the dog's inepti-

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tude, his inability to point birds, the man had been aiming his gun at the dog when Wallis, out walking, came up on them. Wallis bought the dog for all the money he had in his pocket, a dollar and sixty-seven cents, and named him Dudley, because he couldn't hunt.

"It's a hot summer," Wallis said aloud, to himself. It was mid-October. Coldness seemed it would never come, in the days. Everything tasted good, in the warmth. He shut his eyes. There had to be some trick; he had to be missing something. He was too happy. There was very much the urge to be cautious: to suspect a pratfall.

He flew: long, lazy circles around the towns, over the woods, flying low and slow: peeling an apple as he flew, sometimes. Looking for the thing, the thing no one else knew to look for yet, though he knew they would find it, and rip it into shreds. He considered falling in love.

He sat on the porch of people's houses, and discussed leisurely the business of finding oil. He scratched his dog's ears, and talked hunting. He ate dinner; he took their leases, writing a personal check, and became friends with the people. His jeans and shirts were always clean. He didn't worry about his happiness too much. It was always there. He could count on it. In the years 1902, 1903, and then again in 1917, there had been some wells drilled in the basin. Then nothing: for years, and years. Now they were coming back. His heart had been broken, like anyone else's, so very long ago, and unfairly. It didn't matter. He didn't even think of her name, anymore. It didn't even matter, now.

The basin was an ancient, mysterious, buried dry sea: scooped out deep into the old earth, over three hundred million years ago, and then filled slowly with sand, from an old ocean, waves lapping at empty shores—an Age of Sharks, thousands of varieties of sharks in the warm waters in those days—empty, beautiful, hundreds of miles of empty beaches, a few plants, windy days, warmth, no one to see anything, the most mysterious sea that ever was—and then, slowly, the sea

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had left again, and the dunes, the bays, the beaches, were covered up, by millions and millions of years: swamps, first, then deserts, then mountains, then river country, carrying parts of the mountains back down to the same sea, older, further south . . . The basin and its history lay hidden, and no one ever knew it was there, and the oil and gas from all its lives and warmth were only two thousand feet below the green and growing things of the present. It had been ten thousand feet below, at one time, but erosion and time were stripping back down, coming back closer to it, as if trying to get back to the old beaches, and those times.

The woods were full of pine trees. The hills were steep: they stretched up into the Appalachians, they were the foothills, crumpled, of the Appalachians. The people were terribly wiry and most of them had never seen a beach. Wallis had helped discover the basin's existence. When he walked through the woods, and it was quiet, he tried to imagine the sound the old waves had made: miles and miles of empty beach: nothing there, nor would there be, ever. Doomed, and sealed. A beach missing something, but beautiful. Pine straw beneath his feet.

A late night, in one of the three little restaurants in Vernon: Harry and Jack, eating again, dessert and coffee, the only ones in the place, save for waitresses: near closing time. Going over some leases to be looked at at the next day. The money bag, chained to the table, at their feet.

"Get what you can," said Harry, eyes merry, leaning forward over his stomach: waiting, for Jack to join in, and finish the singsong phrase he'd made up.

"Can what you get," said Jack tiredly.

Harry laughed and leaned back, a howl. "Poison the rest!" he cried. Tears came to his eyes. Old Dudley's strategy was less than brilliant, in the new basin, but effective: if they leased everything that was available, then surely some of it would contain oil, far enough down. Harry thought Wallis' string of successful wells, of having never participated in a dry hole, was a little dainty, a little foppish.

"These little piss-ant two- and three-acre leases," he growled.

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"Shit almighty, a man can't make a living off those things. Shit almighty he can't even buy groceries on them. He can just barely get his money back, so he can go out and buy another two acres." They had tied up over a thousand acres belonging to a family called the Stanfords that afternoon, for ten years—they would probably never drill it—and another hundred and fifty from the Woodvilles, for five years.

Harry ordered another piece of pie. "A man that won't take a risk on what he believes in, and sink it all on one well—a man like that, that can't take a big lease, has got a short hooter."

He cut into the second piece of pie, breathing hard.

Wallis lived in the field, and liked it: the smells. He rolled his maps out on the hood. Only on the very hardest of freezing nights, in the winters, or sometimes for a day or two, in the middle of a drought, breaking summer, would he come into town and get a room at Mrs. Brown's Motel. He didn't have much money. There was some good income from the few wells he was in, but he turned it all back into still more leases. Mrs. Brown let him use her typewriter when he was ready to finalize a lease. Neither of them ever had money. Mrs. Brown was sixty-five and her husband had been killed in a mugging one night at the motel desk: four sad years ago. The car that got away had Illinois plates and they never saw it again. Mrs. Brown had a gas well on her land that Wallis had helped get drilled. The rooms were $16.50 a night.

She let him keep Dudley in his room. It was her only concession. She was violently cheerful. She lived in the motel office, had a small kitchen and folding sofa bed back there, a television and a coffee maker, and it was almost as if she was waiting for the muggers to return.

"Evening," Wallis would say, when he came into the office. (Bells would jangle, hanging over the threshold: a warning signal.)

"Right," Mrs. Brown would say. The grief had made her grim, and she smiled like a skeleton. If she tried to speak even an entire sentence it would dissolve and there would be tears.

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She had loved him beyond what was healthy. He had been a normal man; there had been no call for that excess of love. Wallis was a little wary, uneasy, sometimes, around Mrs. Brown. But he liked her.

"Cold," Wallis would say, grinning at her.

"Single digits," she would say, the lower lip trembling between the two words: the challenging smile, leading with her chin. Daring anyone to say she was not happy. Wallis was a little too sad to talk to her for very long.

Harry and Jack always stayed there. They took showers too long, and used up all the hot water. Anyone staying in the motel could hear Harry's wet coughs, violent hacks. Wallis would read, Dudley's head in his lap, and sometimes his thoughts would drift, and he'd wonder, wonder hard, about Jack: picturing himself—briefly, only for a few almost unimaginable seconds—the way one sometimes imagines being in jail—holed up in that room with Harry. And for what reason, any reason.

The coughs would burst out into the night: almost exactly when the ringing from the last one had just disappeared, thinned away to nothing, and the beautiful night silence and clarity of Alabama blackness was beginning to build back up—smoke, up in the hills above town, from old chimneys; yellow blazes of windowlight, comfortably and widely scattered over the hills, some hills larger than others—only then would the next cough, like something expelled, blat out. It was on one of these sleepless nights that Wallis realized Harry was dying.

He tried to picture Dudley, the other Dudley, at the funeral, but could not. He knew that Harry had family. Doubtless they pictured him a hero: gone for weeks at a time, on the great hunt, seeking out the biggest riches, never knowing he was only executing: a gear, a wire, a small switch on a wall in a closet. The wind blew hard, over the motel. Dudley slept soundly. Wallis lay on his back with his hands behind his head, sadly, and listened to Harry cough. He had a little more

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respect for Jack, but there was still no understanding. The winds got harder, limbs and branches began to land on the roof, and finally, the sounds of the coughs were carried away and lost quickly in a place where no one would hear them, ever, or at all.

Wallis dreamed about what it was like, to be out there when the well was tested, and the proof, terrible, powerful, smelling good and very hot, came rushing up the hole: proving that you had been right.

The town was too small. He couldn't avoid them all the time; they had to run into each other, now and again. Dinner, dusk, at the cafeteria with the buffet, on Wednesday nights. Tables near each other: Harry, speaking across two tables.

"Why'd you leave Dudley, boy?" he asked, pausing with his mouth full. There were field peas and grits and all sorts of things in it. The waitress blanched and left that area of the room. Jack looked down at his plate and clenched his jaws. He wanted girls, oil, money, respect. He'd do anything for it: sell himself to Dudley, live with Harry. He played with his cornbread, vaguely, scooted it around on his plate, and leaned slightly forward to hear Wallis better.

"I learned how to find oil," Wallis said. He could have been saying he had learned how to tie his shoelace. It didn't seem to hold any intrigue for him, it was clear, and that puzzled Jack.

Harry was mesmerized by oil, and thought all geologists were witches, shamans, fakes. He could only believe that which was in him.

Jack looked at Wallis and could feel the thing different in Wallis, but didn't know it had a name. There was confusion. Wallis seemed pretty much like a loser, to Jack. Wallis would lose, thought Jack. But the chain around his neck felt heavy: as heavy as if the entire satchel was hanging from it, when he looked at Wallis.

Harry paid for Jack's meal: he told Wallis he'd have to get his own, being competition and all.

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They laughed, going out the door. Wallis finished his tea.

There was a pretty girl in town. Her name was Sara. She'd lived in the valley all her life: lived it above the oil, all the time. She was twenty and wanted to go places. She looked at the money truck a little too long, when it rumbled down the roads, raising dust—the odd young man with the necklace and the old man, and two hounds they never seemed to pay attention to—but also, she laughed at it, after it was gone: after it had passed her by. They had already drilled on her land. Harry Reeves' old puppeteer, Dudley, had drilled on her parents' land—a German family, the Geohegans—a tremendous landholder, they owned over eight thousand acres—and the well had been dry. They drove past her, every time, now. She laughed at them after they were gone. She hoped they would stop. She went down to see Wallis: everyone knew where he camped. This in the summer. Her hair was soft.

"How many wells have you drilled?" she asked him, after she drove up and got out. He was sitting on the wing of the plane, looking at his notes. Wallis knew who she was, and where she was from, and about her parents' well. He didn't think it should have been dry, and he knew that the rest of the lease was oil. He sat quietly on the wing of his plane and considered the nuances of revenge. He bit into an apple. She handed him a piece of cheese she had brought, boldly, like a student having come for a good grade—she held it far out away from her, for him to take—he accepted it, sliced it with his knife, looked up at her with the sun behind her—and he handed her a piece back. He did not have enough money to lease all of the Geohegan's land. He had found too much oil, this time. He did not know her name, only who she was.

"Thirteen," said Wallis. He decided to keep it quiet, about the oil beneath her. To wait until he could afford to drill the whole thing. To sting Dudley. It would be a big well: the biggest in the county, the most the old sea could give.

"Thirteen?" she said, softly. Her hair was blonde, down in a braid. She had on a light blue dress. There were faint freckles on her nose. Thirteen wells did not seem like a lot.

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"I've never drilled a dry hole," Wallis said. It was funny, he thought, for him to say that. It made the apple taste bad.

They finished the cheese. He reached into his truck and got a thermos: shared some warm water with her. She brushed her hair back, as if the wind was in it, and watched him. Lamar County, in the state of Alabama. There were bears in her woods. Her parents raised chickens, and had many cattle. It was unbelievable that he had a plane. She didn't think she'd look at the money truck, anymore.

He had mapping to do that day. She stood back, and watched him take off: bumping along down the long wide open field; when he was hazy in the distance, the plane left the ground. She shielded her eyes. He disappeared over the hill.

Dudley, in the warm cockpit, lifted his head and looked at Wallis steadily as the plane flew, gaining altitude. He could tell what was coming.

When they were far above the earth, Wallis banked the plane and then rose up into a steep climbing stall, after the engine was warm, pointing the plane straight at the sun, as he did every day, at least once: the propeller's revolutions becoming weaker and softer, more futile, as the engine strained against the pull of the rocks and mountains and rivers below it: the persistent, wavering squall of the stall horn: hard shuddering, and then the plane, five thousand feet up by now, peeling off to the side, unable to go any higher that quickly—the nose was pulled abruptly down, as if following an anchor tossed from the window, and went into a spinning dive, like a ride at the fair, straight at the ground, which was visible far below in patches through the clouds, and pencils and erasers and dust flying past their ears, the press of force on their bodies. Dudley was strapped in, as always. His long ears hung out at right angles, as if in space.

When the last clouds were cleared, Wallis pushed the yoke in sharply, about half its length, and pressed one rudder pedal in, to stop the spinning. The plane pulled smoothly out of the dive, and was flying flat and straight. Things that were stuck

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to the ceiling rained back down again. They were going to live. Wallis could do other things with an airplane, too. It didn't charge him, or thrill: he did it to stay sharp—so that when there was a thunderhead or wind shear or he got trapped between trees and a power line, too near a radio antenna's guy wires, he would be able to get out: have the ability to get out.

Farmers and others below who saw him, practicing far out over the larger, wooded hills that rolled up, folding, into the Appalachians like waves of forest, said he was witching: that there was a device or machine in the nose of his plane, that could smell oil. Whenever he passed over a large stretch of it, it pulled the plane down towards it, into a dive.

Wallis was a hero, and risking his life for them. He ate free, at some of the restaurants, on slow evenings when no one else was in the cafe. They began to feel badly, sometimes, taking the money from Harry Reeves and Jack: bargaining, dickering. Wishing maybe they could lease to Wallis.

People waved at him and Dudley, when they saw them driving, and yet he remained a mystery, unlike other things in the country. Their lives were simple and straight and were crops and the grocery store, and ever, pleasurably, hatefully, always with emotion, the weather, but he was outside these things.

"He's got to be that way," an old man said, spitting, when they talked about him at the gas station. "He's looking for the hardest thing to find in the world. Shit, hit's buried: hit's invisible."

Head nodding. They looked up at the sky. He was looking for the invisible thing. He could see things they couldn't.

Another time, in a restaurant: breakfast, the three of them in the same room. Early, foggy. He looked at Jack, when Jack turned slightly away from him, checking out, paying the cashier. There was no way on earth Jack could *like* Harry, or even tolerate him, or Dudley either. It was very obvious, even to Wallis, who rarely watched people, that Jack was being a fake, a turd, a brown nose, for some later motive. Everyone knew, it had to be a natural fact and feeling, that it was better to belong to yourself, and have one acre in a drilling well, than to

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belong to another man, even if that man had a hundred, a thousand wells, or the whole county. This had to be common knowledge, a fact of existence, didn't it? How could one breathe, and not know this? The girl that had left him had done it because she accused him of never being himself.

Jack turned and was looking back at Wallis. Wallis realized this, but could not turn away. His mouth was slightly open, even: staring. He looked and looked at Jack, frowning with his eyes, trying to get a handle on it but unable to, trying to see beyond, like the old ocean he could see from the sky—but not this. Finally Jack said, "Damn," and turned away, shaking his head, and left the restaurant, behind Harry, who was carrying the satchel. Wallis watched him go; he gave them a minute to be gone before leaving himself: woodsmoke, when he stepped outside, and the smell of bacon. He rolled his collar up and felt good.

Later that day, flying, he forgot to pull the carburetor heat switch, coming down through some clouds. The plane looked different to him, too, the mountains as well. He had to put down in a field, and got out and walked around. The ground felt different, too. His legs were shaky. He called Dudley and they walked a little ways off from the plane and he lay down in the middle of the field in the sun on his back and closed his eyes, and felt wind, sun, the ground below him. He lay with his back to the ground as a wrestler would, pinning it: he thought what a short distance two thousand feet was, and tried to imagine the oil beneath him, straining to get out, but was unable to: the sun confused him, with its warmth, and brightness. He dozed, and did not work, the rest of that afternoon. His life meant something. He was his own man, belonged to no one, he had never drilled a dry hole, and he had saved a dog from being killed. There was a balance sheet and as long as one did not go below zero, it seemed a victory.

He was terrified of going below that zero: of belonging to someone else. It seemed that everything bad would follow from that. You would catch emphysema. You would have to wear a chain around your neck. You would have sold yourself, and by the very act of doing it once—though he was sure those

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who did it told themselves otherwise, that it was only for a little while—you would never, ever be able to buy yourself back. Because there wouldn't be anything left to buy. Not even if you went a little fraction of an inch below that zero. The sea would move in: the old times would be buried.

He fed Dudley, scratched his ears, ate apples in the sunlight and in the plane as he flew, and held on for dear life.

He and Jack and Harry were somehow yet again in the same restaurant at the same time, even though it was north of town several miles. Bad luck, thought Wallis, the third time in a month, but also he was not much concerned. He had bought twenty-seven acres in section thirteen that day, for a tenth of what it usually cost: that was how he'd been able to afford such a large amount. The reason he had gotten it so cheaply was that Old Dudley had drilled a well there several years ago, and had thought it dry, and had plugged it. Wallis had never owned twenty-seven acres in a prospect before. He was almost dizzy. Too, it would be fun, to embarrass Old Dudley—to go in and drill a place that Dudley had left, and find oil. The statement would be stark and obvious: Dudley could not find oil on that twenty-seven acres, Wallis could, therefore Wallis was a better geologist.

He didn't need to be nice to Dudley. He would try hard to stay away from the very natural feeling of revenge because he knew it was a trap, like going below the zero—he had found so much oil for Old Dudley, when he worked for him, unrewarded—and it would cut him up, and beat him, even if it did sound fun and good—questing for vengeance—but neither did he have to be nice to him. If revenge happened, it happened. It was good. He could belch in Old Dudley's company if he wished and not excuse himself.

He had escaped Old Dudley, and his life mattered. The salt and pepper shakers on the tables seemed to have significance and clarity. He watched Jack and Harry muddle along through the buffet: pausing, asking questions of the chef, frowning, rubbing their chins: reaching (Harry, fatly) slowly and hesitantly for this dish, and that: pie, beans, chicken—leaning

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over and reaching as if controlled by strings from above. The air tasted like spring water to Wallis. He got a bowl of oatmeal, a piece of cold melon, and a Coke. He sat at the far end of the restaurant, his back to them—and their backs to his—and ate. The melon was fresh; the oatmeal was hot.

He left a tip and walked out the door. It was good, to be able to just stand up and take four steps and be out the door: not having to turn around, or look back, or pass by them. He drove out to the field with the windows down and took his sleeping bag out and unrolled it on the ground and got in it.

The stars were like Christmas. The night was cold. The twenty-seven acres on his lease application in the glove box made his toes still want to dance around in the bottom of the sleeping bag. He supposed that he was getting close to revenge and that was different from flying around eating apples and looking for oil but also there was the wild and primal goodness of the feeling, visceral, of having scored a killing punch, of having entered, for the first time, something loved: something about it made him want to do it again, and maybe even again and again. He lay awake for a very long time, pleased with himself, and was enormously happy. The stars seemed to encourage him, as if they were on his side. He knew Dudley wasn't sleeping beneath them.

It got much colder. New Year's Eve saw zero; the next day, twelve below and windy. Sara and Wallis lay in bed at the Brown Motel with the lights off and the curtains open. Dudley slept at the foot of the bed: a beautiful, steady breathing. There were stars, more than ever. He held her tightly, for Wallis. They watched the stars for a while, and then she rolled over on top of him and made love to him. She looked at his face the whole time. There were blankets over them. The room was cold. The bed rocked, steadily; Dudley stirred in his sleep once. She was imagining that she was atop one of the pumping jacks that went down with the rods and then came back up with a rushing swab of oil. In the cold weather, the oil sometimes steamed.

He tried hard, very hard, to love her. He felt, the way he

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felt all things, just a time in the air, that it was time for him to be in love. That he needed to be in love.

After, he closed his eyes and pulled her to him, and put her head up under his chin: kept his eyes closed. It would happen. He would find love. They would find the Big Well, he would somehow get the money together to drill it himself—not paying for one percent, or three percent, but the whole one hundred percent, start to middle to finish—he did like *that* idea—and then he would try. There would be a house in the woods, with Dudley the hound that couldn't hunt, and they'd have a child, and Wallis would work very hard at loving her the way he thought it *should* be, the pure way, the way he found oil. If only he could love her the way he looked for oil, it would be perfect. He'd try.

Around midnight, there began a fierce, jagged coughing in the night, coming through the cinder blocks from about three rooms down. Wallis listened to the sound of Old Dudley running a young man and an old one down to their deaths. Sara awoke, not knowing where she was, reaching for a lamp.

"What's that?"

"Harry and Jack," he said tiredly.

"Is there oil on my land?" she said, suddenly. She had his shoulders in her hands: she was over him again. He looked away: at the dark wall, and listened to Harry's coughs, vertical now—waddle-pacing the room, an old death stagger—Jack probably with his head under both pillows. It was very possible that he couldn't love anyone. He knew there were people like that.

"Maybe," he said, getting up angrily, leaving her grasp and pulling a pair of underwear on: Dudley rising, startled, at his heels, not knowing this routine, but with him. They went quickly out the door—Sara sitting up, pulling the blankets around her, looking at the empty door—and barefooted, shivering violently already from the weather's strength, Wallis hurried across the gravel and reached Harry's door and began kicking on it: backing off and hitting it with his heel. There wasn't any moon. The wind carried the thumps of his kicks quickly off. The door shook. A light came on: Jack's face

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through the crack of the door, the chain beneath his chin like the chinstrap on a football helmet.

Wallis put his face in the crack so that he was an inch away from Jack's startled eyes.

"Shut that shit up or kill the old man," he said. Dudley growled, and raised his hackles: he stood as big as a wolf. Leaves blew in through the cracked open door.

"I . . . I . . . I'm sorry," Jack said.

"It keeps Mrs. Brown awake," Wallis said. The sound of the "k's" on his words was like death. Jack could see the squareness and hardness of his teeth, and the thing that was in the bottom of him, in the bottom, far bottom, of everyone.

"We'll . . . he'll stop," Jack said.

"I'm going to cut his throat out, tonight, if he doesn't," Wallis hissed. "I'll either come through the door or the window. There'll be blood all over the sheets."

He walked hurriedly back to his room, and barely made it before he could walk no farther. Sara cried out loudly when he got in bed; it was as if a block of ice had been slid in with her.

"Yes, there's oil under your land," he said. He was shuddering as if seized by a current.

She came back to him: moved back in closer, held his coolness, tentatively, then all the way: pulled him to her yet again.

"Oh, baby," she said, eyes shut: her body, to him.

"Oh, baby," he repeated: trying it out.

He was numb. He warmed slowly.

When he awoke in the morning, he felt thicker, heavier, and later in the day realized it was because he was now carrying two things, anger and revenge. Logic, and having worked for Dudley—having seen everything done the *wrong* way—told him that the angrier he got, at not being able to fall in love with Sara, the less he was going to be able to—but he had exploded at Jack and Harry, and now, walking, he still felt as if it was building up again. He felt as if he was oil, far below the ground, trapped in a thin layer of rock. He felt that when the drilling bit did hit his formation, and just pierced the very top of it, he would come out: blowing, all of it, a fire, a roar. That

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he would burn down whatever it was that had touched him. He bent down and scratched Dudley's ears, dizzy. The day was clear and cold: the light was pretty. It seemed—no, he knew—that you could only do one thing well: to do it the right and best way, there could be nothing else. His old boss was too good at making money, whether off of other people's woes or not, to be a good geologist. Wallis was too good at what he did, feeling what used to be, to make money. He knew about the old ocean. He could see it, and felt he had lived on it. He had its number.

He wondered if he could drill a dry hole: if he could stop wanting to find oil.

He wondered if she was worth it.

She came driving up just as he was climbing in the plane that afternoon—jeans, tennis shoes, a heavy old blue sweater and a parka: her hair, in the sun. She hugged him, standing under the high wing of the plane to do so. Her face felt cool and smooth, like love was supposed to. She smelled good, and he wanted her.

Surely, thought Wallis, if love was not capable for him with this girl, then it could not exist, for him.

He took her up. He was jittery: flushed, a little, as when he first realized he was tracking oil. (When he actually found it, pinpointed it, mapped and contained it, he was cool—anticlimactic, by that point—but the first scent—the turn of the head, the question—that was the rush.)

She took her parka off. She took her shirt off. The sun was warm, up high, in the cockpit.

"Show me you're a very good pilot," she said. She was laughing. Her eyes were laughing. It happened to everyone: it could happen to any one. It was the most common thing in the world. She had come out to see him.

They were a mile above the earth. They made slow, graceful love: he let her hold the yoke, work the pedals, some, as they flew, and made love. It alarmed him, a little, to not be able to see in front of him. He liked her in the bed, and its softness, better. He also knew that the bed would never again be the same for her. It did feel good. He closed his eyes as long as

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he dared. When she began to cry out he took the yoke and began to climb slowly into the sun.

She wanted to fly over her farm, her parents' farm. She wanted to drop her bra into the woods, to see if she could then find it. She didn't wear underwear.

"What will happen if it hits someone?" she asked.

"It'll kill them," he said, truthfully. She was poised at the little crack of the window, ready to open it, holding the bra in one hand like a thing soiled. She looked at him, surprised, and then laughed: the thought of it. And now the excitement: the risk. Quickly, she shoved the window open—the fast suck of wind, she had to push hard to open it and keep it open—and tossed the bra out, this time like a cheer. He watched her watch it. Her back was still bare and had goose pimples. Her waist was narrow, with faint gold hairs in the base, and her back broadened as it rose. She was totally engrossed, watching the bra get smaller and smaller. He banked into a tight holding turn, like water spiraling around in a drain, so that she could keep watching. He watched her, in his plane. He had found love, his first time out, since the last time. It was no different from anything else in the world, he decided.

Harry and Jack, with binoculars, on a hill deep in the woods, the highest point in the county, watched them circle.

"He just threw something out," Jack said.

"It's a marker," Harry said. He began to cough: bending over. He straightened up. "I've seen 'em do it a million times." He turned to Jack in earnest: believing himself, almost, as he went along. "It's for when the woods are too thick or dense to survey. He's marking where the oil is. They do it in Texas all the time."

Jack watched them circle, and nodded. They would try to find the marker.

Seventeen acres, from the Fellowship Church of Vernon. Sixty-eight acres, from a serviceman in Germany: a quiet, simple letter, explaining what he was about, what he wanted to do—to go in and drill where Dudley had missed. He got the lease for free. He began to go back and search all of Old Dud-

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ley's plugged wells. About half of them seemed, to him, to be good. He took Sara with him often. They climbed to two miles in the plane. She wanted to laugh and cry both: there was so much to be seen. They climbed to three miles, until the engine faltered and their heads felt light and it was hard to breathe—Dudley on the floor, head under his paws, confused—and looked briefly, when there were no clouds, at the big roll of Appalachians: it was easy to see where the sea had ended. The area below them was, quite obviously—from three miles up—the old beach. Beaches. A hundred miles of it, curving and snaking all around, like a serpent, like a thing still, even that day, alive: it seemed to move as they watched it.

Haze, and the sweep of the earth, curving away over the edge, its lovely roundness: they had left the earth. Three minutes, four minutes, as long as they dared—five—the sky a rich heavy purple, a color never seen—and then the slow ride down, that took forever: both of them suddenly aware of the frailty of the little plane; the lightness, and thinness, of the wings, light canvas wrapped around a hollow aluminum frame. The thinness of the thing that kept them aloft.

"When he crashes, we go in and top his leases," said Harry. The plane had disappeared from view, even to the plastic drug store binoculars. "We pay the landowners, beforehand, to lease to us, exclusively, the first day his leases run out."

Jack nodded. It was what he was being taught. The leases were for three years. Harry and Jack tied up the land with five year leases, but for some reason Wallis never asked for more than three years. Jack counted: both he and Wallis would be thirty-one, then. He looked at Harry's folds of fat, his face, mouth open—a wetness, saliva—as Harry looked heavenward through the little glasses, and was jealous, that Wallis owned his own leases. The richest man in the state of Mississippi—a king, the king of the poorest state, in money, in education, in anything—was using them to chase a poor young pilot in love across the county, to learn what he was doing. With an old, dying, coughing fat man leading the chase. It made

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Wallis seem like some kind of magic. It made Old Dudley's terrible money and power seem less.

Wallis started to work late, at nights. He got a key from the Probate Judge, so that he could lock up when he was through: midnight, one A.M. A peanut butter sandwich for supper, around seven: the great ledger record-books open, like biblical testaments, showing years and years of dizzying history; mortgages, leases, foreclosures, dry holes and producers: he chewed his sandwich, slowly, and read them, and looked in all the right books. Dudley sat up on top of the counter and watched him, and waited patiently. Wallis was looking for all the leases on old wells that Old Dudley had plugged without testing. He was going to stop looking for oil, purely, and restrict himself to looking only for oil beneath places where Old Dudley had missed it. It would be like slapping his face with gloves: satisfying.

It had been a new feeling for him, the other day, an unexpected one, taking the twenty-seven acre lease that Old Dudley had dropped, several years ago. It was a surprise, and wonderful and new, much as flying and loving had been for Sara. He wanted to do it some more. In fact, it was all he wanted to do.

Sara came up to the courthouse with him once, sat on the counter with Dudley and drank a beer, swinging her legs, and watched, but it was far too slow for her.

When he could no longer keep his eyes open, he would call to Dudley, who would leap down from the counter, and he would shut off the lights and lock up, and drive back out to the pasture. Sometimes he would build a little fire, and fix some coffee, and go over what he had found. It was a lonely life. Dudley would sit and watch him, and wait for whatever was going to happen next. Some nights there was the sound of coyotes; geese, owls, too. The air was fresh.

They flew more and more: everywhere. They did it five hundred feet above the ground: they went lower. They skimmed

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along over the tops of trees: scattering birds, doves in roost. Sara got to be a fair pilot.

"Can you find oil down on the coast?" she asked him.

Wallis grinned, shook his head, looking at her. "Nope," he said. "Just up here." His greatness was limited. He thought later how it was odd that he had never asked himself that question. There had never been a desire to look anywhere else. Why would a man want to go into a country he was not familiar with, knew nothing about?

He showed her stalls, spins, figure-eights. She was delighted one day when he rolled; she clapped her hands. He started leaving Dudley in the truck. More aerobatics, less mapping. Dudley drilled on one of his prospects, one that Wallis had been able to muscle into by buying two acres on the edge of it (and then twenty acres beyond that—in case the edge proved someday to be the middle—which it often did). They went out to visit the well: Sara, her hair long and clean, static against her sweater, on his arm, flushed, elsewhere, in her mind: having just flown.

Old Dudley was out at the well, too, which was very unusual: Wallis had never seen him on a location, as long as he'd known him. There was word that he hadn't been out to one in ten years.

Harry and Jack knew nothing about geology, and were off eating or leasing. Old Dudley had his chauffeur and stretched limousine, both of which had been flown over from England. There was red mud from the thick hills all over the limousine's brilliant blackness.

Wallis smiled, gave a little wave, then smiled wider. He was free.

Dudley smiled, gave his little embarrassed half-nod—a tip of the head, almost like a bird beginning to feed—when he recognized Wallis, in jeans and boots. Dudley had on a black business suit, and an overcoat, and Wallis felt good, that Old Dudley was acknowledging his freedom. He could read Old Dudley, had learned him like a fascinating book, had studied the locations where he had drilled, and knew why he did

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things—and he was confused, then, when Old Dudley turned his look to Sara, and almost smiled, as if relieved at something. As if he knew some sly and childish secret which he would not tell Wallis but would keep to himself, and be made happy by it. He turned and began walking, with his chauffeur, over to the well: roughnecks, up on the derrick floor, looking down, shirtless, muddy, ragged: a few of them wrestling with the drill pipe. A clear blue sky, a warming day.

Wallis' dog bolted: a blur at the edge of the cleared location was a rabbit.

"Yo! Dudley! Get back here!" Wallis shouted. Old Dudley's shoulders stopped, and he half-turned: an expression of genuine surprise, and then disappointment, to see that Wallis was running after a dog. He turned back around and continued walking. The well turned out to be oil: the largest discovery ever found in the basin.

Old Dudley stopped by Wallis's and Sara's truck on the way out: the dog, muddy, bounding happily around in the back of the truck, barking at him, at the strange long car. Old Dudley rolled his window down so that he could speak to Wallis.

"Maybe we should plug it?" He looked somehow a way that Wallis had never seen him. Wallis leaned slightly closer, curious: never afraid, though the sense of power was thick and heavy, malignant, like a bad odor.

"I beg your pardon?" The well had metered out at 1200 barrels per day.

Old Dudley chuckled: it escaped, and was a high quick chuckle, so that it was almost a giggle. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand, as if trying to rub it away.

"I mean, that's a lot of oil: we don't want to glut the market, or anything. Perhaps we should shut it in, until prices are more economical, more worth our while." Dudley's father had been a farmer, and poor all his life. This time Old Dudley didn't giggle, and looked straight and hard and striking at Wallis, but Wallis was free, his jeans felt good on his legs, and he liked the smell of the old truck. He knew that it had to be impressing Sara beyond end, to tingling, for the richest man in Missis-

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sippi to be carrying on this conversation with him for such a long and earnest time. Wallis shrugged, and held up his hands. It truly did not matter.

"Why not?" he said. "It's your well."

Old Dudley's face was leaning a little too far out: the anger, if it had been that, had to come back in. He looked tricked, betrayed.

"I mean, for twenty or thirty years," he said. But he was not good at cruelty. He was only good at making money.

Wallis smiled, shrugged.

Old Dudley watched him for a minute, unable to believe it was sincere, but then he did: the girl, the dog, the truck. He smiled at Wallis, no longer angry, but thoughtful, nodded to Sara—the tip of an imaginary hat, it seemed—and even glanced at the dog, as he was being driven off, after the window had rolled back up. The well began selling oil that afternoon.

On the drive home, Old Dudley thought about purity, and even intensity: how it used to be, when it truly didn't matter whether a well was shut in, after being discovered, and not produced—how finding it had been the good and only thing. He was a businessman now, but had been a scientist, in school, and had been impressed with the knowledge that purity could never last, that nothing could ever last: that everything was changing, always. He had made his choice early and had not bothered to waste the energy—for it would have been wasted—trying to preserve it, the purity. He was sixty and had ten or fifteen years of life left and what he was interested in now, after so many years, what he was wishing, was that perhaps he had retained a little bit of it after all, and its intensity, because he had all the success he needed.

Though he had seen Wallis's leasing activity, on the scouting reports, and was alarmed, slightly, at what it looked like he was doing. As if even his success—not physically, but emotionally—might be spirited from him.

He thought that Wallis would fall back: that he would lose his purity, too.

He had hundreds of employees to think about and

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hundreds of business concerns, most of them larger and many of them more critical and pressing than what had over the years gotten to be a sideline, his oil activity, particularly in the Black Warrior Basin, but on the drive home, it was Wallis, and purity, and Wallis's truck, dog and girl that he thought about, all the way: thumb and forefinger holding his chin: tenement houses, ragged, and scraggly winter cotton remains, and drooping telephone lines whizzing past. Tinted windows: conditioned air. An old black woman, in an apron, coming out onto her porch and staring, as his limousine passed. The chauffeur, up in front of him, so far up in front of him that an intercom was necessary, to communicate. He looked away from the chauffeur, back out the window again, at the delta, and thought about Wallis. He knew that he couldn't have picked a better girl to do it, but also Wallis was no fool, was finding oil, was on to something, and still had the dog and truck.

Harry Reeves died on a Sunday afternoon, while driving the money truck: a grim picture it made, him collapsed over the wheel, heart squeezed out by fat, finally, as the truck and dogs thundered down the mountain off of Little Hell's Creek Road and toward town—Jack, trying to steer, trying to pull Harry's deadness—with one hand—off of the wheel—his foot jabbing empty space in the vicinity of the brake, getting tangled up with Harry's dead legs, polyester double-knit . . . The truck glanced the curb, outside of town, and rolled, spilling dogs, Harry, the spare tire, lug wrench, and the money satchel: Jack held on to the steering wheel and stayed in the truck.

There was no one else around. He got out, amongst the broken glass and hissing—one dog was dead, curled up in the wrong shape, and Harry was stretched out, dead like an actor—the other dog was injured, and was trying to reach around and lick its hind leg, or bite it—and like the last person on earth, with a raw and stinging patch on his forehead, Jack began walking in circles, around the truck, methodically, gathering up all of Dudley's money: caught in tufts of grass, tumbling across the road, some blown up against Harry, like

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seaweed against a whale's carcass . . . Two thousand feet above the darkness of underground, oil in places, and a sealed, Paleozoic ocean, a silent beach, two hundred and fifty million years of silence, he walked, alone, picking up money. He wondered if he would get fired. It hadn't been his fault: it had been Harry, that had wrecked the truck. He wondered what he would do, for a living, if he lost his job. The richest man in Mississippi: he was working for the richest man in Mississippi.

Wallis was having fried chicken at the Geohegan's when he heard the news. The operator had called to tell Mrs. Geohegan: the harsh, shrill clang of mountain phone, that made the walls tremble, that made the silverware in his hand tingle. He looked out the window down over the large pasture and motionless cattle, and into the wooded creek, and out further into blue haze and treetops. The chicken was good. The gravy was rich, and had pepper in it. He and Sara and Dudley had played tag, out in the yard, before lunch. He paused, digesting what he was hearing of the conversation between Mrs. Geohegan and the operator, tasting the food, and was relieved to feel sorrow, and a stillness, like being in the woods, alone late in the afternoon, that Harry was gone. He had been worried by his quest for vengeance, and was hoping—knowing that Harry would die—that when he did, the news would not please him.

That night, under the stars, colder than usual for March—a night wind—again, as ever, with his hands behind his head, looking up—dreaming he was on the beach, the old beach, the one he knew better than anyone else and was born two hundred and fifty million years too late to see, to know, to walk on—to skip across, barefooted, splashing in the shallows—warm tidal channels, back dunes, sea oats—he thought about what he would do if he did not look for oil, up in this country. He tried, faithfully, to think of Sara's kisses: of her eyes, looking up at him, when he talked about oil: the shine in them, like that of her hair. A magic child. It bothered him that he could not fall in love with her. Perhaps if he could find one

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more oil well, a big one, the biggest ever . . . there had to be a release in it, eventually.

He was trapped into succeeding, he thought. Maybe if he drilled a dry hole he could be normal.

He went to the funeral. Jack's dog was bandaged, looking silly, sitting in the cab of a new blue truck: watching the funeral with a bandage around its waist and head. Wallis went over to the rolled-down window, and stuck his hand in, and let the dog lick it. Jack came over and asked if Wallis could do him a favor: if he could take care of the dog. . . .

"Yes," said Wallis, without looking up. He watched the dog lick his hand. The dog was desperate to be loved. The dog was desperate to love. He thought about Old Dudley, coming out to test that well. He thought about a prospect in the eastern portion of the county. The sun and windiness of spring was making him feel light and drawn away. It seemed that every day he could see the old beach more and more clearly: where the dunes were, which ones would hold oil and which wouldn't, long after they had died, and were buried: what the waves had looked like, what the view down the beach had been—the long, straight stretches, and too, the bends, and deep parts, offshore . . . he was the only inhabitant in the world, and it was a beach before men, and he liked it: he felt . . . loved. As if the beach had chosen him, for its loneliness. How could he drill a dry hole, when he knew the old empty beach so well?

He flew. The trees and creeks, cemeteries and hills, didn't bother him. He was seeing his old land. He now only made weak, stabbing attempts at loving Sara. She flew with him: they did it, and afterwards, he was looking out the window again; sometimes, and without guilt, even, he would look out even as it was going on, the love. She wanted to go to Atlanta one weekend, having never been, and he took her. It didn't matter. He found three more wells: small, small interests, but they belonged to him.

She wanted to go to New Orleans, and they stayed in a room

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high up over the city and smelling of old rich times and with mirrors on the ceiling, above the bed. He felt detached, far from his shore. They walked down to the river, where it went into the sea, at night: a cool breeze lifted off of it and came at them. This was his old ocean, cowardly, on the retreat, now: some three hundred miles south of where it had once been, in its greatness, inland, when it was brave: the great advance into a place and country where it had never been before, and might never return to. He looked out at the river, going into the Gulf, and tried to feel close to it, knowing it was the same, but it wasn't. It didn't have that bravery his had had. She looked at him, questioningly, and took his arm, and they went to eat. She was starting to fall in love with him.

She moved in with him: they bought a cabin, on land up above the field where he used to sleep. The austerity and church-going of the hills' people bent, for them, and didn't mind, very much: Wallis was becoming a champion, and some things seemed right. When he went out to get into his plane, there were often people standing around it, a lot of children, watching, waiting: wanting to know where he was going, that day. What part of the country he was going to check.

When he took leases, and did courthouse work—his news had spread—there were businessmen, undertakers and monstrous insurance salesmen, seeds of bad earth, and leeches, like Dudley only without money, who followed him: like puppies, like gulls over a field being furrowed, they tracked him, anticipated, and battled savagely and wretchedly for the small pieces that, like Wallis, they could afford: two acres, fifteen acres, one acre. They used him, and then sat back fatly, smiling, and waited, hopefully, for a well to be drilled on their lease. Not understanding, not knowing—where the oil was.

He made four more wells, the next month: twenty in a row. No one had ever made more than four in a row.

Sara still wanted him to drill on her land.

"I can't afford to take your parents' lease," he said, "and with

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that much land, it's unfair to even consider a free lease, even if they would give it. I can't drill it, not yet, not now." He was getting better at the love-making: he seemed to be growing into it. He brought her things, when she was in the bathtub: a cool wet washcloth, to press to her forehead; a mint; a stick of gum. He was surprised to find that he liked to watch her chew gum.

"But there is oil under my land, right?" she asked. Pausing, washing under an arm.

"Right," he said. "A lot of it."

He wanted to touch her face, but drew back. The bathroom seemed empty: hollow. A thing was missing.

The twenty-first well, gas, from the very borehole of a well from which Dudley had walked away, three years ago: much gas. A ring, for her finger—not wedding, just friendship—but it felt good, when he held that hand, and they rolled, or walked or sat. Woodpeckers hammering in the woods, above their house. The scold of a blue jay. His picture was in a newspaper, then two magazines. He kissed her in the day, without even wanting to undress her.

Old Dudley heard that they were living together and was pleased. A little.

Once, on a farm far back in the hills, farther than he had ever been before—a glint of sun, on a lake, late in the afternoon, had pulled him there: the plane peeling away, flying him there in short minutes—so far back up into the hills that perhaps it was not even his sea he was feeling—he touched down, and got out, and walked around, all day, feeling something and seeing things but not knowing what was going on. And Jack, in the new money truck, saw him go down, and drove out in that direction, drove all morning, and found where his plane had landed—a gravel road, wide but not very—and Jack went all up and down the side roads, with the satchel, leasing for pennies from people who had never seen

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a drilling rig. And Wallis was unable to get even a few small leases before Jack and Old Dudley got all of them. A well was drilled, and it was dry.

Wallis did not leave his territory any more. He stayed on the ground he knew, and Jack decried him, told all, proud of nothing.

"He was going to lease it, but I stepped in and took the leases before he could and it was dry. He was going to drill a dry hole."

Old Dudley drove up, one day, in the summer, in the limousine. The sun had come out about an hour earlier, as if turned on by a curtain: suddenly. Sara fixed him coffee. Old Dudley had a proposition. Wallis had to think about it overnight, before saying no.

Sara didn't say anything. She didn't know what was right, what was wrong. She wasn't sure if she even wanted the well drilled any more. Old Dudley could have done it.

Her mother came out one day and brought them chicken. Dudley the hound had dug a place out on the side of the cabin where he would curl up and lie down. She petted his back, scratched his ears. He played with the other dog, who was healed. The two dogs sat in the sun and jawed like bears in a stream. The light on their coats and in their eyes was startling, up on the hill, back in the trees, coming down through the leaves. When he drove home in the truck, in the evenings, if he was going back to the courthouse, he would have supper first. She would listen for his plane, in the afternoons. It did not make sense, but she could hear it even before the dogs could.

Two more of Old Dudley's failures turned into successes, for Wallis: one, a small well, the other, a rushing oil well. He took more leases, with the money. He bought Sara a dress, that looked beautiful on her.

Old Dudley bought Jack a plane. It amused the townspeople. They started giving their leases to Wallis for free: if he

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would only drill on them. Old Dudley turned sixty-two. He hired a man who was fifty-five to work for him: a geologist, to do the same thing that Wallis was doing, only on fancier, larger maps. In the fall, Wallis drilled his first well: number thirty-four, that he had been involved in, but this one, finally, all his. There was so much gas when he drilled into it that it blew the drill pipe out of the hole, caught on fire, and burned the rig down: a man was killed. Old Dudley came in and leased around him, and began making smaller, weaker wells. Wallis didn't have any money again.

Sara kissed him, the night it happened, held him with the lights off, and thought about her parents' farm. She hadn't ever had money before. No one in the county had. She didn't know if it was important or not.

Jack flew, clumsily, nervously, and dropped flaggings out the window, randomly, trying to make it appear he knew what he was doing, remembering Harry Reeves' wisdom. Shakily, he told Old Dudley that he thought he had it figured, and that he thought he knew where they should drill. He'd seen a creek, water bubbling out of a spring: it had to be a fault. They had a rig on it the next week: it made a good little oil well. Jack bought a suit and a gold pocketwatch, and watch chain. Even though Old Dudley didn't wear one.

When it rained, Wallis worked in the courthouse, or drove: looked at the trees, and the way they grew. But it wasn't as clear. He couldn't see it all at once. There was no money for a while, only leases, and he paid debts with the dollars coming in from his fractions in his good wells.

"I don't mind being poor," Sara said one evening, mending a shirt. "But I don't want to have any chickens around the house. Every family in this county has chickens, damn it, leaving feathers and bad smell underfoot, and I don't like the sound they make, either." She stamped her foot. There had been no talk of chickens, ever before—Wallis didn't want any chickens, either—and he was surprised. It had been five weeks since the rig burned.

"If ever there was a sound of being poor, it's the cackle of chickens," she said. Her parents had always had chickens

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around the house, even after they were not poor any more. She was very near tears. He got up and put his hand on her forehead, and stroked her hair.

"No chickens," he said, cheerfully. "All right! No chickens!"

She had to laugh, to keep from crying. He made her laugh often. She had thought she wanted to go places.

She didn't ask him about her parents' land any more. She thought, sometimes, about the mirrors in New Orleans—how down looked up, and up, down: everything reversed, from the way it really felt.

They played games.

"I want to learn how to swim," she said.

He smiled. "When I drill again, next time, and hit, we'll build a swimming pool inside the cabin. We'll heat it. It'll be right next to the kitchen, and we'll add on a room for it."

"I can come straight in from grocery shopping in the winter, set the groceries down on the table, slip out of my clothes, walk down some steps, and dive into the water," she said.

"Nekkid," said Wallis.

"There'll be steam coming up off the water," she said.

They smiled. She tried to picture him working for Old Dudley, as he had, for six years, but could not. They laughed, and joked about Jack flying the little plane. He was clumsy. He bounced the plane like a basketball, on landings. He got lost, often, and all the various towns in the area had at one time or another seen him flying a circle around their water tower, sometimes several times in the same day, trying to find out where he was.

Old Dudley was trying to go back and re-lease all his old acreage, as just a blanket policy: to halt the embarrassment. But there was too much of it, and many people wouldn't lease, to him or anyone, until they had talked to Wallis: to see if he wanted it, even for a lower price. They didn't want Dudley to drill any more dry holes on their land. The money truck had lost almost all of its charm except to the absolute and very poorest, most desperate few.

Everyone had come from miles, to watch Wallis's rig burn

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down. The glow had been visible in eight counties. The earth had shaken, around the location.

Jack wrote a lot of checks, for Dudley's leases. There was no longer a need to wear the key on a chain around his neck. But he kept it there anyway, out of habit, and for power.

Springs were beautiful. It rained, and shimmered hot, too, in the summers. Eventually, as Wallis began to pay more and more attention to Sara, he drilled a few dry holes. Old Dudley grew old and feeble, lost his teeth and went into a nursing home: his lawyers declared him incapable, and took his business away, gave it to his children. Jack crashed, one day, still looking: still dropping white handkerchiefs out the window of the plane, still pretending to see. Wallis and Sara got married, in the field. Mrs. Brown died, and the motel closed up, and became vacant: weeds, and vines. Wallis drilled; Wallis leased. He held on for dear life, to two things, not one, himself and another human being, and did not let go, and never went under zero, not for a day, not for an hour.

Sometimes, they would fly down to the coast, near Mobile, and land the plane on a lonely stretch of beach, and get out and walk along the shore, in winter: no one else out. He would lean slightly forward, listening to the slow, steady lapping of waves, dying into the shore. He would hold Sara's hand. If she tried to speak, while he was listening, imagining, he would raise a finger to his lips. The only reason he could have two passions, rather than one, was because he had never ruined the first. It hadn't ever been sold, when asked for. She watched him watch the beach, the ocean, and considered his success.

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John Koethe

Mistral

1.

There seems to be, about certain lives,
A vague, violent frame, an imperceptible
Halo of uncertainty, diffidence and taste
Worn like a private name that only God knows,
Echoing what it hides, that floats above a bottomless
Anxiety that underlies their aura of remote calm.
The intense half-dreams accumulate behind a smile;
The mind hesitates in its reflection, but remains alone.
Part of their story is an emptiness that isn't there,
But that holds the rest in a kind of desperate embrace
Until the rest is still, and the loneliness reverberates
With the breathing of an almost human kind of peace.
But the contentment is imaginary, and the tenderness,
Like the tree in God's mind, a figment of contemplation.

The feeling alters or the memory wanes, leaving the mind
Still waiting aimlessly, in the light trance of time,
While the incidents shine on a receding screen,
Or a remark hangs, or some impulse lingers unfulfilled
While love fades, until only a deep difference lasts.
Sometimes at night, when the past opens and the buried
Longings wrap themselves in colors, it almost starts
To seem as though another form of life were possible:
That although anger and love are real, the smaller,
Transitory emotions are real too, and more alive.
Day brings a sense of distance and the schematic moods
Of the depicted life—vacuity, release and friction,
But behind the friction and the pretense of indifference,
A conception of life as infinitely far away. And the sense
Is sharper, the imagination unrelenting in its isolation,

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Yet sometimes, after a walk on a fine morning or a quiet
Meal in the little restaurant, absorbed, for a moment,
In the fleeting pleasures of the afternoon.

2.

Somewhere in the initial, lost experience of fiction
There is a phase of detachment, a dense, irrational
Feeling of enchantment mingled with a sense of loss
So abstract that it must have made the differences
Between memory and the imagination seem almost unreal.
Life wanders or the mind strays, but the story holds,
With the flat, incantatory tones embodying the desire
For consecrated moments and the need for repetition
In the same reflexive images, but becoming stranger,
Until they start to seem something like other people,
Or like figures in some stylized tableau set vaguely
On a coast in midsummer, with the sun shining madly
And the houses strung like pearls above an azure sea.

He was sitting on the terrace with a group of friends,
Lost in another of those vacant, sentimental reveries
About aging and the afternoon, or about how intricately
The summer day ends, or about clothes, or about light.
Along the beach a few waves moved, as the summer
people
Watched the gulls descend in slow, exhilarating glides.
Now and then he made a desultory remark, just to amuse,
But his mind was elsewhere, quietly contemplating some
Provisional conception of himself, paradoxically young
But with some of the details rendered slightly indistinct
By too much passive sensation, and the bright, distracted
Conversation getting more private every year from an excess
Of gin and sun, yet the overall bearing marvelously alert,
Even in repose: the delicate, angular head, rich-old, with
Light, dry hair and eyes that lock and suddenly look away;
The thin, impeccable English shirting; the expensive skin.

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He was forty-eight, and still waiting for somebody to adore
Without wanting, or without the ultimate possibility of
loss.
His life felt as though it were always just about to start
Or end, or about to become relatively clear; but for now,
Temporary alliances would do, and the minor moods that
last
All afternoon, waiting upon the mild exigencies of
summer,
Rehearsing the fashionable despondencies, or trashing N.
He was all alone, with a range of sympathy unable to extend
Beyond the glass sphere of consciousness, where he lived
In an illusion of the complacency he'd always wanted, like
A dreamer clinging tightly to what he doesn't have
anymore,
Or the mind instinctively reflecting what it can't become.
And then gradually it started to slip away, leaving him
Like someone in his own imagination, fabricating his past,
Breathing in the fragrance of depleted rage and each day
Looking forward helplessly, in perplexity or pain, until
He was beyond forgetting. But he kept it for a while, like
The love he'd held in his hands, then lost in wealth and
Memory abandoned it to tenderness, to the magnification
Of feeling, and to the solitary pretense of regret.

He continued to inhabit his imagination, but with a sharp
Sensation of the way time passes, while its illusion lasts.
He began to think of his life as an interminable
preparation
Cast in the form of a reminiscence, with an extended part
In the present tense intended for the contemplation of
those
Light boats, and with a phase of indifference followed by a
Sense of exhaustion and a perfunctory ending, for that was
How, eventually, his own renaissance was going to come:
Not in a flood of inspiration, but through an interval of
Change so long that it was going to feel like the
meticulous

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Development of one constant theme. And then one day
He realized he'd lost the past. There wasn't any
Inevitability anymore, and the imaginary differences
That used to seem so final didn't matter now—
There was just life, but part of his soul was dead
And the rest was waiting in the garden, where a little
Breeze rustled the paper lanterns. Maybe later a
Kind of character would emerge, but that would have
To be in the imagery of another life: the vague,
Abstract affairs, and the distracted way
Love swept the ruins; the play of conversation
And sunlight on a tessellated floor;
The buried stairs.

3.

Deep inner dark
Where the violence gleams and the indifferent
Face that only God sees looks up from the water
With its relentless smile, while its features shatter
And float away and its lineaments start to disintegrate
Into shimmering, light and dark patches, which one day
Were going to come to seem like elements of happiness.
Sometimes the fragments can illuminate the enormity of the years
And how the soul is lost in them, as in a form of memory
In which there aren't any disillusionments or dreams,
But where it can be seen in its entirety, in an impersonal perspective
And without feeling, or lifted out of its isolated context
Like an inert thing and suspended there until the vertigo subsides
And the illusion that the years converge on it returns.
In dreams, or in these moments of distraction that derive from dreams,
Sometimes the waiting can begin to seem so real that the illusion fades

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Into the security of home, as though everyone else had
gone
While the nightlight had continued burning, and the
future
Had been transformed into an infinite field of possibility
again.
Yet in that closed, capacious chamber where his real soul
Inhabited its shadowy mythology of light and recollection,
Delusive memories and self-fulfilling expectations glowed
and disappeared
In the darkness where he waited patiently, held spellbound
By his mirror-image, and by the years collapsing inward in
concentric waves.
For the past was over, and tomorrow had dwindled to a
pin,
While the person in the water had gradually become as
alien to him
As the sound of his own voice, as though the characteristic
words
Were being spoken by a stranger, in a language he couldn't
comprehend,
As he listened to the grandiose and convoluted explanation
Without any real sense of understanding, captivated by the
air of intellect
And the inverted anger, glaring down at the deserted
surface
In abject despondency, yet finally acquiescing in its flat,
Fastidious music, with its insistent undertone of sadness
And its persistent tendency towards abstraction, like a
fallacious
Argument against the disenchantment that was going to
come
Eventually, in the amorphous future, when the twin spells
Would loosen and their two trajectories would intersect.

It's milder now. Summer is ending with the human
imagery
Strewn everywhere like fragmentary objects, exhausted by
his dreams

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And shattered by the sublimated intensity of his actual
desires.
And it gets easier to see, yet the rest is still almost
impossible to understand
Completely, as their faces vanish like despondent ghosts
Into the thin air of consciousness, while the secondary
voices
Sleeplessly repeat the customary sanctifying consolations
In their private language, leaving, at the center of the
imagination,
Just a blank expanse where people merely illustrate each
other,
Featureless and flat. But then none of them were real.
It was a waste of feeling, though the aspiration mattered
For its vision of the separate sense of life it would have
made
As tangible as the slow hallucination of a summer day;
For he was something more and less than a mirage, a
hollow
Simulacrum of that hidden world of feeling and
resentment
Where the mind creates its own peculiar history, and its
way of looking
Back upon itself as through a stranger's eyes, as through a
mirror.
And the result is free, like the animula that flourishes in
solitude
Or in that cave of recollection where the colors coalesce
Behind the doppelganger's death mask, hovering out of
reach somewhere beyond
The range of consciousness, as though the soul were just a
story something told
Whose spell was memory and whose quiet theme the
deepening sense of isolation
Memory brings, until the years begin to seem like stages
Life goes through while love deteriorates and disappears
Into a state of feeling, and then a phase of play and
introjection,

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Abnegation and exculpatory gestures, and finally into a
subjective scream.
But he was an idea, and only an idea can dissolve this way,
Like God, into the mystery of someone else. And only in
The guise of a reflection can the soul's intense immediacy
be apprehended,
Freed from its prison of personality and the contingencies
of character
Into a condition beyond certainty, in which nothing
changes
And it remains alone, in an oblique kind of happiness,
Bathed in the furious transparency that separates it from
Another person's dense, unimaginable interior reality.

4.

Time passes, as a cold wind sweeps the summer shapes
away
At the release of autumn, while the intervals between the
years
Become shorter, and the illusion of their real significance
Becomes more and more attenuated, and finally
disappears.
I used to think that everyone's life was different, and that
nobody could change
Except by dying, or by gradually withdrawing from the
world
Into the mind of God, into the fantasy of being seen for
what he was
Objectively, by someone else, in solitude. Day after day
The portrait becomes vaguer as the mind disintegrates,
Yet the essential core of secrecy remains, and the strange
sensation
That this sense of life I thought that other people knew so
well is mine alone.
The illusion is depth. The banality at the heart of things

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In which the heart can rest and let its final feelings form
Lies on the surface, and the transitory moods that seemed
to deepen into life
Vanish like wishes now, like words. What remains behind
Is a kind of feeling of contingency, a gradual waning of the
present
Into a mere possibility, as though it were a dream of the
extent of life
In which there wasn't any tangible experience of finitude,
only a dull,
Unfocused anger as the words slide off the page and out of
memory,
And the faces wash away like caricatures on a wall, and the
sky fades.
I sometimes think of writing as a way of effacing people,
of transforming them into ideas
By way of saving them, or of restoring them to that
abstract state of innocence
From which the burden of the concrete personality
descends.
Like sounds in sleep, unreal beyond the confines of their
dream,
This force of life beyond intelligence maintains its surge,
But with a separate person cloistered in each moment like
eternity,
Cut off from others by the wall of consciousness and from
itself by
Time, the form of consciousness, as though to exist at all
Were to remain alone. And yet I'd wanted to remain still
And let the light of recollection flow around me like the
gradual
Absolution of the world by darkness, on the verge of sleep.
The common sense of things intensifies, and then dissolves
away,
Until a fear of something deep within myself, inert and
old,
Is what I have to live in, and the tone of my own voice all
I can hear.

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What happened to the winds that used to blow from
nowhere?
But it flows in one direction, and the imagery that used to
seem transparent
Is part of its history now, like the dead leaves of fiction,
And the passages that glowed with inner life give back the
blank,
Insensate stare that means their intimations of another
form of life were meaningless.
I know the inside of one story, yet the incessant ache that
Saturates its pages speaks to no one, and its nuances of
Light and thought and feeling aren't reflections of the real
Person who exists and changes, but of the bare soul
alone—
Because by starting from another person's life and going
on from there
I'd thought, that way, I'd come to feel the difference more
deeply;
And because I'd wanted this to be something other than a
poem.
This is all there is. And the year has come around again,
The days are longer and the high, thin clouds that gather
in the atmosphere
Like afterthoughts inside the nearly empty mind don't
seem as strange now
As they did a little while ago, before my fear of finding no
one had abated
And the waiting started that has come to seem like
happiness,
A condition of mere being, of year to year inhabiting the
same
Repetitive illusion until now I feel suspended in its single
thought,
As though my world had finally dwindled down to this,
and left me here.

And as the years go by these remnants of a future I once
had

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Are also going to fade and my indifference deepen; yet somehow the mind,
Even in abstraction, seems bound to go on issuing its faint,
Disruptive cries of disagreement that conceal it as it turns away,
Distracted by the sense of something real and unattainable
That I know now is going to characterize my life until I die.
It's not so bad though: no one remembers what the world was actually like
On those first evenings, and the poetry that comes and goes
Eradicates all traces of their implicit promises that God was listening
And that time was going to answer in agreement; and it doesn't matter
That instead of being happy I am merely older, for the same
Impatience with myself that brought this private dream to life
Will surely vanish with it, leaving me alone inside a stranger
World than I remember, without any inkling of its underlying
Emptiness, or of having lived here in a kind of wordless paradise
Where nothing changes, now that everything has changed.

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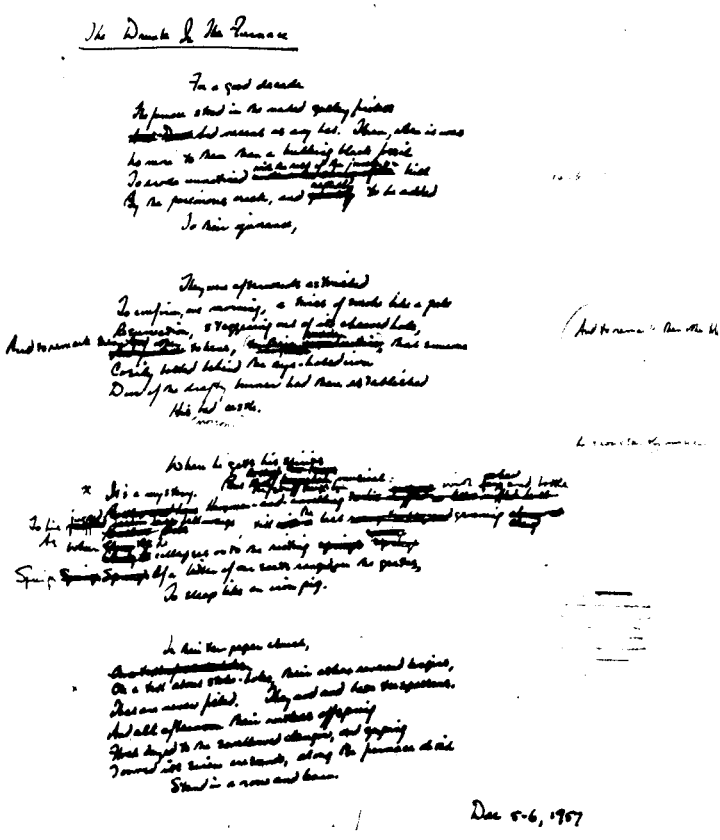

A manuscript page from W. S. Merwin's "The Drunk in the Furnace." Merwin's drafts of this poem include over fifty versions of the opening stanza.

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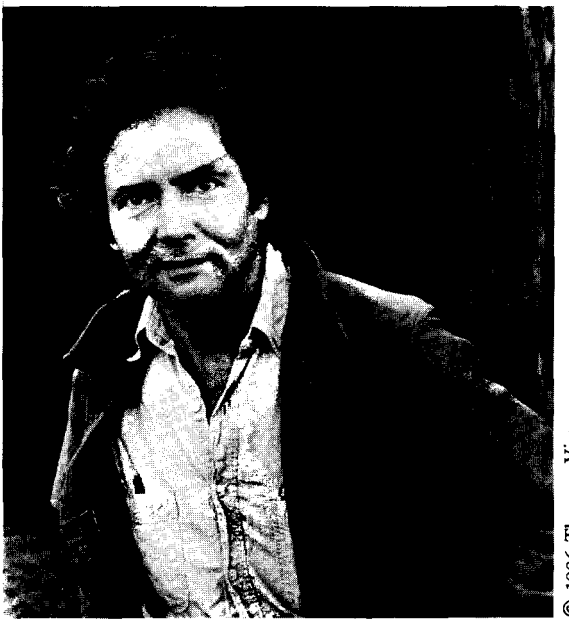

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The Art of Poetry XXXVIII
W.S. Merwin

I went to visit W.S. Merwin at his home in Ha'iku, Hawaii, on the northeast coast of Maui, in mid-June, 1986. The Merwins (William, his wife Paula, and their Chow puppy Maoli) live towards the end of a winding, rocky dirt road that dead-ends at a cliff overhanging the Pacific. They have three acres of land which Merwin has planted—in red volcanic clay ruined by fly-by-night pineapple farming fifty years ago. He and Paula tend it now like concerned parents whose growing children were once sickly—healthy at present but needing constant attention. Because of his efforts, the grounds are

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richly alive with native vegetation: huge mango, banana, and papaya trees, looming palms whose leaves have been splayed by the hard winds, flowering pink, yellow and red hibiscus and white gardenia plants, giant red heliconias that look as if carved from wax, white birds-of-paradise, ferns of all kinds. There is a large vegetable garden and a small enclave of native plants—some of them endangered Hawaiian species—which Merwin keeps in plastic pots protected by a roof of palm fronds and chicken wire.

The house, which Merwin designed himself, is sided in Eucalyptus robusta. *It has high ceilings, dark eucalyptus floors, sliding glass windows and doors. It is surrounded by deeply recessed lānais which are filled with potted plants and bird-feeders. Always one is aware of the vista of the Pacific in the distance.*

The furniture in the house is mostly country French (an old armoire, a heavy wooden dining-room table), a reminder of Merwin's many years in rural France. There are wooden bookcases crammed with books in almost every room. The books themselves are varied and wide-ranging, though they also demonstrate Merwin's concentrated interests in Zen Buddhism, in ecology (I counted six copies of America The Poisoned*—five "to give away"), botany, gardening, agriculture, history, in the life of Native American and other tribal societies, and in Hawaii itself. All in all, the house and its surrounding property create the feeling of a wholly encompassing and engrossing world.*

William Stanley Merwin was born in New York City in 1927 and grew up in Union City, New Jersey, and in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He has published twelve books of poetry to date: A Mask for Janus *(1952),* The Dancing Bears *(1954),* Green with Beasts *(1956),* The Drunk in the Furnace *(1960),* The Moving Target *(1963),* The Lice *(1967),* The Carrier of Ladders *(1970), for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize,* Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment *(1973),* The Compass Flower *(1977),* Finding the Islands *(1982),* Opening the Hand *(1983) and* The Rain in The Trees *(1987). He is well known for his work as a translator and has published at least*

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fifteen books of poetry in translation, including Selected Translations 1948–1968 *(1969) for which he won a PEN Translation Prize, and* Selected Translations 1968–1978 *(1979). He has also published four books of prose:* The Miner's Pale Children *(1970)*, Houses and Travellers *(1977)*, Unframed Originals *(1982), and* Regions of Memory: Uncollected Prose 1949–1982 *(1986). He is currently finishing three new manuscripts; a new book of poems which Atheneum will publish, a volume of translations from the Argentine poet Roberto Juarroz, and another, done in collaboration with Soiku Shigematsu, of translations from the medieval Japanese Zen master and garden designer Muso Soseki, both of which North Point Press plans to publish. And for the past few years he has been working on several long essays on Hawaiian history and its bearing on the present. Merwin has lived in many places over the years—Spain, England, France, and Mexico as well as in New York City—but he has now settled, it seems permanently, in Hawaii.*

Our interview took place on consecutive June days in Merwin's study. Both times we met in the late afternoon at an hour he usually reserves for working in the garden. The light on both afternoons was radiantly bright—the ocean sparkled in the background. On both days Merwin was barefoot (in Hawaiian houses it is polite to leave your shoes at the door) and wore khaki shorts and a t-shirt—his usual dress at home. Moderately tall, he has curly graying hair, intensely clear eyes, and at fifty-nine he still looks remarkably boyish and handsome, the poet incarnate.

INTERVIEWER

In the past thirty-four years, you have published twelve books of poetry, three books of prose, and at least fifteen books in translation. Yet you said recently that "Writing is something I know little about." How is that possible?

W.S. MERWIN

The kind of writing that matters most to me is something you don't learn about. It's constantly coming out of what I don't know rather than what I do know. I find it as I go. In

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a sense, much that is learned is bound to be bad habits. You're always beginning again.

INTERVIEWER

Do you write every day? Ezra Pound once advised you to write seventy-five lines a day. Have you followed his advice?

MERWIN

I haven't written seventy-five lines a day, but for years I've tried to stare at a piece of paper for a while every day. It tends to turn one into a kind of monster.

INTERVIEWER

How's that?

MERWIN

You have to be rather relentless about pushing other things out of the way. This activity of writing, which has no promises attached to it, comes to be given a kind of arbitrary but persistent importance.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say something about the hymns you used to write for your father? Were those your first poems?

MERWIN

I suppose they were. I was about five years old when I wrote them. I wrote them on my own, and I was very disappointed that they weren't used in church.

INTERVIEWER

You have a highly developed ecological and environmental consciousness. When did it start?

MERWIN

I've tried repeatedly to figure out just when and how it began. It's probably impossible to say. Such dispositions come long before most decisions, I think. But there are two things

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I remember. First, I had a rather repressed childhood. I was brought up never to say "no" to anybody, never to say I didn't like something, never to talk back. But one day—I must have been around the age of three—two men came and started cutting the limbs off the one tree in the backyard, and I simply lost my temper and ran out and started beating them. Everybody was so impressed with this outburst of real rage that my father never even punished me. And the second thing, I was so fascinated by these watercolors in a book about Indians that I began teaching myself to read the captions. The Indians seemed to be living in a place and in a way that was of immense importance to me. So I associate learning to read—English, oddly enough—with wanting to know about Indians. I'm *still* growing into it. I've never outgrown that. The Indians represented to me a wider and more cohesive world than the one I saw around me which everyone took for granted. I grew up within sight of New York City, and whenever I was asked what I really wanted to do, I would say I wanted to go to the country. I'd been taken out and had seen the country when I was very small and that was what I always wanted to go back to. I'm not sure of the exact origin, but I do know that it goes back a very long way. Feeling that way about "the country" has made me ask questions that I suppose are strange to many of my contemporaries, but they seem to get less and less eccentric as our plight as a species grows more and more desperate, and we behave accordingly. As a child, I used to have a secret dread—and a recurring nightmare—of the whole world becoming city, being covered with cement and buildings and streets. No more country. No more woods. It doesn't seem so remote, though I don't believe such a world could survive, and I certainly would not want to live in it.

INTERVIEWER

Your father was a Presbyterian minister. Do you think you inherited from him a Presbyterian urge to improve the world?

MERWIN

I don't think it was an urge to improve the world. It was an

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urge to love and revere something in the world that seemed to me more beautiful and rare and magnificent than I could say, and at the time in danger of being ignored and destroyed. I think I felt that as a very small child. Though how much of it I owe to my father or his family, I can't say. The world around me did not seem to me to be satisfactory. There was something incomplete about the world of streets and sidewalks and cement—and I did have a very strong sense of growing plants and trees and so forth, and still do. I remember walking in the streets of New York and New Jersey and telling myself, as a kind of reassurance, that the ground was really under there. I've talked and tried to write about that, but I feel that I haven't even begun to say it. But that hunger, that tropism, is something that I don't believe we can live without, even if we aren't aware of what we're missing and by now many of us aren't aware of it. We're missing it just the same. We're deprived of something essential.

INTERVIEWER

Is it some profound connection to the natural world?

MERWIN

The connection is there—our blood is connected with the sea. It's the recognition of that connection. It's the sense that we are absolutely, intimately connected with every living thing. We don't have to be sentimental and pious about it, but we can't turn our backs on that fact and survive. When we destroy the so-called "natural" world around us we're simply destroying ourselves. And I think it's irreversible.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see a connection between poetry and prayer?

MERWIN

I guess the simple answer is yes, if only because I think of poetry as an attempt to use language as completely as possible. And if you want to do that, obviously you're not concerned

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with language as decoration, or language as amusement, although you certainly want language to be pleasurable. Pleasure is part of the completeness. I think of poetry as having to do with the completeness of life, and the completeness of relation with one's experience, completing one's experience, articulating it, making sense of it.

INTERVIEWER

How about the influence of Zen in your work?

MERWIN

When you talk about prayer in Judeo-Christian terms, prayer is usually construed as a kind of dualistic act. You're praying to somebody else for something. Prayer in the Western sense is usually construed as making a connection. I don't think that connection has to be made; it's already there. Poetry probably has to do with the recognizing of that connection, rather than trying to create something that isn't there.

INTERVIEWER

In your memorial poem to John Berryman, you remember that "he suggested that I pray to the Muse/get down on my knees and pray/right there in the corner and he/said he meant it literally." What do you think of the advice?

MERWIN

I think it's excellent advice. Writing poetry is never a wholly deliberate act over which you have complete control. It's important to recognize that writing is at the disposition of all sorts of forces, some of which you don't know anything at all about. You can describe them as parts of your own psyche, if you like, they probably are, but there are lots of other ways of describing them which are as good, or better—the muses, or the collective unconscious. More suggestive and so, in a way, more accurate. Any means of invoking these forces is good, as far as I'm concerned.

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INTERVIEWER

What did you learn from Berryman during your undergraduate days at Princeton?

MERWIN

I tried to put some of that in the poem I wrote about him, some of the main directives that he made. Intransigence was one of them. He taught me something about taking poetry very seriously. He was certainly one of the two or three brightest individuals I've ever known, and his sense of language was passionate and had immense momentum. His integrity was absolute. He was a wacky man, but that devotion was like a pure flame all the time and that was a great example for me.

INTERVIEWER

You've written an affectionate memoir of R. P. Blackmur, "Affable Irregular." Was he an example for you as a writer and an intellectual?

MERWIN

I revered Blackmur. He was a kind of mentor and parent, except that the relation was not intimate, and there was a great deal of awe in it. I think that Blackmur had, in some ways, the most haunting literary intelligence I've ever known. He was a critic of a kind I really revered, too, and he was not serving himself with his opinions. He thought of a critic as a house waiting to be haunted. I haven't reread those essays in many years now, and yet things that he said and attitudes that he embodied, I've never forgotten. I know that he had deep uncertainties and yet he was a man of great independence. He reassured me. He encouraged me to believe that my own hankering after independence was okay.

INTERVIEWER

So he encouraged you to follow your own path?

MERWIN

I think he did that with many people. I don't know how many people took the advice. I think that even without his ad-

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vice I probably wouldn't have fit into the academy. I'm very uncomfortable around institutions for any length of time. They make me uneasy. Like a "shut-in".

INTERVIEWER

Who were the first poets your own age that you knew?

MERWIN

Well, I knew Galway Kinnell at Princeton, but we didn't read each other's poems very much. James Merrill came through once to see Blackmur. I didn't really know the poetry of my contemporaries very well until I came back from England and lived in Boston. I was almost thirty.

INTERVIEWER

So you were already developed as a poet in a certain way?

MERWIN

In a certain way. Until then my main influence had been Pound and all the poets of his generation, the great figures of that generation. And Pound turned me toward medieval poetry.

INTERVIEWER

A lot of your early work seems to have followed a Poundian program. How central was he to you as a model?

MERWIN

He was very important. Pound's ear was a revelation to me when I was eighteen and nineteen. I mean I really heard something clear when I read him. Many poets since Pound have heard something pure and penetrating in his work. I don't subscribe to a lot of the myths about Pound. I've tried to. Pound is so important to me that I've wanted to admire him very much. The intellectual coherence of Pound's work is something that I don't any longer believe in. I really think he was a very chaotic, fragmented and troubled man. I don't think it adds up to this prescient and profound, architectural perfection that Hugh Kenner and some people have read into

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it. One minute I find him dazzling, the next minute disappointing and often exasperating. The example of writing by what you heard rather than out of your opinions—it was funny, he was so opinionated—that was the side that appealed to me. I imagined it was more exceptional than I do now. Now I suspect that all poets proceed by hearing. It was Pound's devotion to language and to poetry, and that incomparable ear.

INTERVIEWER

Would you talk about your visit, which you have called a pilgrimage, to see Pound at St. Elizabeth's in the 1940s?

MERWIN

I was staying with friends in Washington, at Easter vacation, when I went over to see him. He received me in this open ward, with people wandering around, flushing imaginary toilets. He sat in a deep chair and held forth. I was eighteen—I didn't have much to say to Pound—and he told me all about how, when the Hundredth Canto was finished, the whole thing was all going to fall into place and so on. It would be like putting the keystone in the arch, or the lintel on the doorposts. He was also wonderfully generous and wrote me postcards afterwards. "Read seeds, not twigs E.P.," he wrote. And he gave me a bit of advice about translating, about taking translating seriously as a kind of practice, about learning languages and trying to get as close as possible to the sense and the form of the original. I didn't know what he meant about a lot of those things until I had been practicing for a while, until I had been trying to do it.

INTERVIEWER

What initially attracted you to translation?

MERWIN

At eighteen it's very hard to find something to write about. I was writing a lot but it was perfectly clear to me that what I was writing wasn't *about* very much. You have what you think of as your feelings when you're seventeen and eighteen, and

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they are your feelings, but they're very far from your words, you know, and the words are a mess. With translation, it was possible to actually work on something—and pay attention just to the writing, to the writing of something—and getting the words right, coming at it from the other end, from the "how" side.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to translate primitive or archaic poetry?

MERWIN

I guess I didn't really start translating it until I was well into my thirties anyway. I had always wanted to learn an oral language, a nonliterate language. I don't know what it was about my education and my temperament and character that kept me so long from doing that. Those Crow versions, for example, which I did about 1970 or '71, were all done from Robert Lowie's work on the Crow in the thirties. And I had very much the feeling about the Crow, along with American Indian poetry in general, and many other non-literate poetries, too—that even as we talked about it, it was disappearing. And I think of it as of comparable importance to, say, the burning of the library at Alexandria. But I never did set about learning one of those languages until quite recently. I went to Crow country when I was doing those translations. I tried to find out what other work had been done on the Crow since Robert Lowie. It turned out very little work had been done at all. There had been a little bit of work done on the grammar of the language, but no more collecting of material; and Lowie himself only collected a few pages of lyrics. So, from a vast tradition, that's all that's left. It's like having maybe one or two pages of Herrick and one of Donne and two or three of Keats out of the whole of English literature. You know, you're grateful for them, but it makes you sick to think of what's been lost. The Crow were not the only ones, either. The Crow were one of many great cultures. You look at those Crow lyrics, and you know they are the last of a vast, deep, powerful tradition. We

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brought about the loss of those things. They're lost; we can't re-invent them.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your early work, and maybe even your strong interest in translation, indicates any ambivalence about being an American poet?

MERWIN

No, I never thought about it that way. There was a time when I really tried to sort that question out. But translation never entered into it—I mean, translation always seemed to be a way simply of expanding the possibilities, you know, of not being stuck. American poetry of the forties, which I grew up in, seemed to me pretty wooden. I mean, it was like living in a packing crate, and I knew I had to get out of that. Trying to figure out what it meant to be an American poet was something I did particularly during the years when I was living in England and very much wanting to get back to America. I certainly knew that I was not an English poet. But what it is to be an American poet I still don't know. It's nice that we no longer have to think about that. We still seemed to have to worry about it in the forties.

INTERVIEWER

How did you come to know Robert Graves? What kind of a relationship did you establish with him when you worked as a tutor in the family?

MERWIN

Well, it was a family relationship. The second tutoring job I had was in Portugal with the Portugese royal family. I was paid forty dollars a month. I was given a house and meals and so forth, and there were no expenses at all. During the summer I went across Spain on milk trains and I was determined to meet Robert Graves, so I just went and knocked on his door. I was staying in a house down in the port of Soller, and Robert arranged to put me up in one of the empty houses in the vil-

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lage there so we could spend some time together. And while I was there, the tutor, who was supposed to be coming out for his son, wired and said he couldn't come, and Robert said, "Would you like the job?" and I said, "Sure." So that's how I got it. Piece of luck.

INTERVIEWER

And how long did you work for him?

MERWIN

I worked for him for only a year, but then I went back and lived in the village for part of another winter, translating *The Poem of the Cid* for the BBC. I've been trying to put together some things about Robert since he died. He was not the easiest man in the world to get along with. We didn't really get along—I mean, not very well. He got along badly with many young people, and especially with other poets, and we didn't part on the best of terms.

INTERVIEWER

What was the problem?

MERWIN

It was all a very tiny circle, and when anything was abrasive, it became very abrasive. I tried a couple of times after I left Robert to bridge the gap because I knew there was really no reason not to be friends, but Robert had decided he didn't want to be friends. He said he was born without a reverse gear. I would feel even worse about it all if so many other people had not had much the same experience.

INTERVIEWER

I've felt the influence of Eliot in some of your work. Did you know him?

MERWIN

Yes, in the early fifties, in London. Eliot was a very kind man. In those days I smoked and liked French cigarettes, and

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people used to give him French cigarettes, which he no longer smoked. So whenever I went to see him he would open a drawer and hand me a whole bunch. That was a big thing in London in the early fifties, and I was touched that he remembered. We used to sit and reminisce about America. There was a side of Eliot that was very homesick for the States, and I was feeling homesick in London, too. We had several wonderful conversations—about the Ohio River and about his family out on the Mississippi in St. Louis and about the riverboats. It's very strange to think of him having any connection with that world. He talked about the *Delta Queen*, that steamboat that went up and down the river until a few years ago. He really wanted to take a trip on that. I wanted to write verse plays in those days, when I was in my early twenties. But, after a while, I came to feel that the plays weren't going very well and that the verse certainly wasn't helping them. As long as I had this fixation about verse plays, I wasn't learning anything about writing plays. I talked to him about that. I said I was thinking of abandoning writing them in verse altogether and trying to write them in prose. "Well," he said, "I've thought of doing that, too, but if I were to write my plays in prose, there are so many other people who could do it better."

INTERVIEWER

How important was Auden to you as a poet and as a man?

MERWIN

I admired Auden enormously. I love some of his poetry. We never knew each other very well personally. In fact, I think we only met twice. I have a few marvelous avuncular letters from Auden at the time when he did the introduction to my Yale Younger Poets book. But we never became friends. Our paths just didn't cross. I was very much in awe of him. I was shy about intruding on him. I used to see him padding around the Village when we both lived there, but I didn't go over and tap him on the shoulder, which I suppose I should have done. Once when he was away, and I was walking around the Village with Allen Ginsberg, Allen said he had the key to Auden's

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apartment. He asked, "Shall we go and look around Auden's apartment?" He said, "I hallow that man." And I said, "So do I. Let's go." So we did, and I must say it was the most god-awful mess I've ever seen. Obviously nothing was ever cleaned or dusted. He had some people staying there who were apparently just as messy as he was. Someone had asked him how he would sort out the mess when he got back and he said, "Well, we'll just peel off the top layer and they can take that with them."

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that the way you grew up created a nomadic streak in you?

MERWIN

Probably. But I think I always wanted to travel. I mean, when I was very small, I remember the great joy of being in my father's church, being allowed to go up to his study a few times and watch the boats on the river and imagine going to sea. It was the old dream from Sir Walter Raleigh—wanting to ship out. It was one of the things that made me read Conrad when I was fourteen. Conrad was one of the first authors who made me want to write.

INTERVIEWER

You've been criticized for excluding "the apparatus of the industrial revolution" from your work, especially from your early work. What do you make of that criticism?

MERWIN

It's probably just. What someone writes about is never an entirely rational or deliberate choice. I've always envied poets to whom the immediacies of history were more tractable than I've found them to be. My difficulty may have to do with the fact that, although I lived in cities as a child, I was never allowed to have much to do with them, and I did feel alienated. I've always felt very different the moment I got out of cities or came back to them. But for many years, of course, this made

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for a real ambivalence, because I felt the need for the ultimate city, which for me was New York, and yet for the exact opposite, for the country, wherever I could find it, and they were always both pulling at me.

INTERVIEWER

Your fifth and sixth books, *The Moving Target* and *The Lice*, are explosively different from the books which preceded them. On a technical level, they break with the formal tradition of the forties and fifties, breaking up lines and stanzas, loosening diction and syntax. And about two-thirds of the way through *The Moving Target*, you suddenly abandon using punctuation altogether. What happened?

MERWIN

In the late fifties, I had the feeling I had simply come to the end of a way of writing. I didn't reject it, but it was no longer satisfying. So there was a period of close to two years when I wrote very little poetry. And then all of a sudden, the first poems of *The Moving Target* came out, I wrote almost half of the book in a few weeks—it was all coming from a different kind of impulse that I had not known was preparing itself. I was in Europe, knowing that if I came back to the States, I would have to get involved in an academic career, or something like that, which I didn't want to do, and yet, not wanting to be in England any more, the tensions of wanting to change my life, and not yet knowing quite how to do it, this all built up, with the result of a release of a new kind of writing, and many of the images and poems of the first part of the *The Moving Target*. The second part of that book was written after I did get back to New York and was living on the lower East Side. Probably the dropping of punctuation was partly the result of many years of reading Spanish and French poetry. Suddenly, they seemed to be a part of a tradition that was mine if I wanted it. Also, I came to believe that poetry has a much stronger relation to the spoken word than prose has. Punctuation basically has to do with prose and the printed word. I came to feel that punctuation was like nailing the words onto

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the page. Since I wanted instead the movement and lightness of the spoken word, one step toward that was to do away with punctuation, make the movement of the words do the punctuating for themselves, as they do in ordinary speech.

INTERVIEWER

James Wright went through a similar crisis in his work at about the same time. Do you see a connection between what happened to you and what happened to him?

MERWIN

Oh, yes. But neither of us knew what the other was doing. A number of people—like Louis Simpson and Robert Bly—were moving in that direction. The Beats were around also. We didn't so much influence each other as feel the same things. It was perfectly clear that the things I had felt as a kind of straitjacket could be broken out of after all. The straitjacket really wasn't there. We didn't have to pay attention to it anymore. The other thing about that time—I don't know that anyone has described it very thoroughly, and maybe nobody can—but all of us were about the same age, and we all went through that at pretty much the same time—throwing out the respectable way of going about things too. We were throwing out all of the apparatus of literary careers and everything, saying, "Ah, that's not important; what's important is writing a different kind of poem." And that's wonderful. In some ways I wish that poets younger than us had gone through that experience. I love the idea of dropping—even if it's just for a few months—all of the assumptions about what makes poems and what makes literary careers and what makes any of these things, and living without that for a while.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder how much you think of yourself as belonging to a specific generation of poets who share similar experiences. You've dedicated work, for example, to Galway Kinnell, Richard Howard, Anthony Hecht, and you've written a moving, haiku-like elegy for James Wright.

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MERWIN

I feel a part of that generation. But I don't feel part of any school or approach or movement or anything like that. I never have. In the late fifties, all of American poetry was supposed to be divided into two camps. That never made any sense to me at all. I've always liked disparate kinds of poets—Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov and Gerald Stern and Richard Howard and Anthony Hecht, and so forth—without feeling that there's any disloyalty or impossibility in that. I'm sad to see other poets and critics who insist that poetry has to be of a certain kind or it's not poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Would you talk about your experiences in the embryonic peace movement and the anti-nuclear movement in the U.S. and abroad? How politically active have you been? How did it affect your work?

MERWIN

I've always known that there were connections. I've tried to find them in different ways, but I've realized that I wasn't doing it very well. I did a bunch of essays about political events back in the early sixties. My involvement began in the fifties. The first demonstrations that I was involved in were in the late fifties and early sixties in the States. One of the first was outside Fort Dietrich, Maryland, where there was a biochemical warfare base. We were glad if there were six or seven of us standing outside the gates on what we called a vigil. Demonstrations in those days in the States were tiny—I mean, sometimes you were lucky if there were twelve people. On the other hand, in 1958, I had been in England, and was on the third Aldermaston march, which was the largest march in England since the Chartists, and very nearly split the Labour Party. It was huge, and the whole of central London at the end of that march was just jammed with people standing in silence. It was unforgettable. I also remember that Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath came and watched the end of that. Ted and

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Sylvia were reluctant to get involved in that kind of thing, but they did come and watch.

INTERVIEWER

The Lice is your bleakest, most apocalyptic and agonized book. It's fueled by a savage ecological and political rage. I wonder what your current feelings are about what you call the "overt misanthropy" of *The Lice*.

MERWIN

When I wrote *The Lice*, I thought that things were so black, that what we as a species had done was so terrible that there was very little hope, and certainly not much point in writing. The arts really were over—the culture, the salutary role of the arts in our lives—that was finished. There was nothing left but decoration. I'd become more interested in raising vegetables. In some ways, I think it's even worse now. But I don't think you can get stuck with just plain anger. It's a dead end in the long run. If the anger is to mean anything, it has to lead you back to caring about what is being destroyed. It's more important to pay attention to what it is that you care about. I don't want to preach about that, but that is how I've tried to find my way out of that impasse by returning to the things that I did care about. They're still there. I remember, for example, just as I was beginning *The Lice*, the Cuban missile crisis was happening. It was a great shock to me. I'd been working in the anti-nuclear movement, and I kept walking through the streets and hearing people saying that we should drop the bomb on Cuba, that it was high time, that we should have done it years ago, and things like that. I kept waking up in the morning in a real fury. I finally thought, well, I know all of the things I *don't* want and what's wrong and what seems to be the trouble, and so forth. But if someone were to say to me, "What would you think of as a good way to live?" I wouldn't have any answer at all. I thought I really should find the answer to that. I had this place to live in France, this little farm, and I thought, I'm going to go there. I realized I didn't

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know how to grow even one lettuce plant. I'd eaten food all my life and I wouldn't be able to recognize it as it grew. It was about time I learned something as simple and obvious as that. So I went there and spent several years just trying to grow the things that I ate, and to make sense of things of the kind. A lot of *The Lice* came during the time that I was trying to work that out. I still haven't found any eternal answers. What is happening in the world is terrible and irreversible, and that history is probably a doomed enterprise. But in the meantime, it's important to live in the world as completely as we can. In Thoreau's journals he's mourning the closing of the Concord Common. He says people will no longer be able to pasture their cows or go on picking blueberries there. He says, "This is terrible." Then he says, "I didn't pay enough attention to it while it was free." Thoreau was always saying things that I seem to have been looking for.

INTERVIEWER

Beginning with *The Moving Target*, and continuing through the next few books, your poems evidence radical dissatisfaction and distrust of language, a sense of the inadequacy and failure of speech. Do you still "believe too much in words" as one poem put it?

MERWIN

I do. I have a faith in language. It's the ultimate achievement that we as a species have evolved so far. (I don't mean that I think we are the only species with a language). It's the most flexible articulation of our experience and yet, finally, that experience is something that we cannot really articulate. We can look out and see the sunlight in those trees, but we can't convey the full unique intimacy of that experience. That's the other side, one of those things that makes poetry both exhilarating and painful all the time. It's conveying both the great possibility and the thing that we can't do.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote that "absolute despair has no art. I imagine

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that the writing of poems, in whatever form, still betrays the existence of hope." That seems to be part of a more optimistic and celebratory turn after *The Lice.*

MERWIN

As I was talking about these two dimensions of language, I realized that I also think this is true of existence and life, too. We know perfectly well from the moment that we know anything about mortal existence, that it is mortal, in the sense that there's no hope—you're going to die. And yet, we go on, our hope is involved in what happens every day as we wake up and go through it and meet friends and talk and read poems and see the light come and go. Our hope is not a thing in the future; it's a way of seeing the present.

INTERVIEWER

I sense some of the same apocalyptic fervor from *The Lice* in some of your most recent work. In your poem "The Inauguration, 1985" you write, "We have elected the end because we have looked on everything alive with a look that has killed it and we see it already dead." Does that summarize your current political feelings?

MERWIN

To a great degree. I write poems of that kind with a considerable amount of doubt. They seem to me to run the risk of preaching or didacticism or rant. But we have to try to write what we feel, if we can. If we have any talent, any use of language that's a little bit out of the ordinary, we have to try to use it. And we have to try to use it in the times when it seems desperately necessary. I don't know that a poem is going to change the course of history, but one can't stop to wonder, to guess about its effects before one does these things. This question came up again and again during the Vietnam War when a lot of us were trying to write poems about it. Did the poems do any good? We'll never know. We certainly wrote, all of us, some very bad poems, and we knew it. But the alternative was not to do it at all, and that seemed unthinkable, and it still

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does. A bad poem, after all, doesn't do any harm; it disappears in a little while.

INTERVIEWER

You have written a lot more memoirs in the past few years. Is that the sign of coming to a certain age?

MERWIN

I've asked myself that. I suppose it is because suddenly it seems possible to write about certain things which may be a way of describing age. But, you know, deliberate plans to write things, as I think back about it, and what I eventually have written, seem to me a little like two people walking along roads where they can sort of wave to each other over the hedge, but not much more. Sometimes I spend three or four years trying to write something, and then all of a sudden start writing something quite different that works, or seems to, whereas the first may not have done so. You know, I spent five years trying to write plays in England, and I wrote five plays, but I didn't like any of them. But out of that, I think, came changes in the way I was writing poems, and I think that out of the poems at the end of *The Drunk in the Furnace* and some of the poems after that came, much later, the prose of *Unframed Originals*. Obviously you have to write one thing to make the next thing possible. You can't have written things in a different order. I think that's the way it should be, too.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first come to Hawaii?

MERWIN

I first came here in the late sixties for a reading and I thought it beautiful, but it didn't seem to have much to do with my life at the time. And then I came back in the mid-seventies and it did, and I stayed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you'll stay?

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MERWIN

Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER

Recently you've begun translating chants and songs from Hawaii. What do you find compelling about the poems?

MERWIN

I'm just feeling my way. Everything that I ever might have fancied I learned about translation is in abeyance while I try to work this one out. There are no chants in English. English has never been a chanted language, so there is no tradition to draw on or to extend. I have the long-standing wish we spoke of to work from an oral tradition, and also the urgent feeling that this tradition is part of a culture that is being lost. But I'm an outsider. Putting it into English isn't going to save it, though it may save some kind of link with it, you know, which seems to me to have some point. I feel it is tied to other kinds of extinction of various things too. Several species a week are now becoming extinct, and this is an accelerating process. It's all because of human action, entirely human action. It's natural for species to become extinct, of course, but not at the rate that we have brought it about. Languages, cultures, and our own language are suffering the same fate. These aren't different processes. They're not different books on a shelf; they're all the same book. Any way of trying to turn that process around is useful. The love of what's there and the attempt to articulate it, the attempt to make this connection with it, the attempt to put it into reverent and complete form in our own language, into words that have some of the excitement of the original poetry, is a way of both paying respect to it—a living and enthusiastic respect to it—and maybe keeping it alive a little bit longer, or just keeping oneself alive a bit longer. At the same time, I've been working with the Hawaiian language as well as with Crow, and indigenous poetry even in translation has led me to some doubts about the imperial present of our own language—it betrays our lack of any sense of place. To some, no doubt, this is an advantage.

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INTERVIEWER

Recently, you've gotten more and more involved in writing non-fiction. I wonder if you'd talk about the impetus behind your book about Hawaii?

MERWIN

I'm writing—trying to write—about what has already happened and what is still happening to these islands. I tried to write essays on political things twenty-five years ago. And I stopped because other people were finally writing about the same subjects better than I could. I don't think I have any particular gift for this. My mind is not a historian's mind at all. I want to write about these subjects simply because they seem to me urgent. The subjects are things which are passing rapidly from these islands and an examination of how and why this came about, and I want to write about it before these things are gone. I want to write about them because they are still, in many cases, vexed questions, and conceivably, by writing about them, one might be able to do something to check the flow. And because I care about the place, and the culture and language of the place. While they're still here. And also, because in each case, each of these subjects seems to be a kind of focus or symbol for things that are happening everywhere in the world. Again, there is always the danger of getting close to writing tracts, and I don't want to do that. But when one is talking, for example, about Kaho'olawe, the sacred island of a culture which has been treated with something like contempt for two hundred years—and this island has been systematically exploited by a different attitude and a different race—when you start writing about this island, it has both a symbolic and a practical significance. When you begin to tell the story to indigenous peoples anywhere in the Pacific, they immediately know what you're talking about and recognize it in every detail. If you start talking to Native Americans about it, they know what the story is all about. There are people all around the world who know what the story is about. It's a story of arrogance, exploitation, and consistent destruction. If the island

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of Delos were being used as a bombing range, as Kaho'olawe is, there are a great many people of European background who would know what that was about, and they would be outraged. The fact that it is happening to another race is something that makes it seem quite unreal, still, to people of European descent. That cultural obtuseness is something that fascinates me and makes me want to look into it in myself and in the world around me and try to write about it. We try to save what is passing, if only by describing it, telling it, knowing all the time that we can't do any of these things. The urge to tell it, and the knowledge of the impossibility. Isn't that one reason we write?

—Edward Hirsch

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Eleanor Ross Taylor

No

Who will meet her?
sitting ahead of me,
her face a crushed girlskin,
her head rotating
almost acceptably, as if she were
just looking out west windows of the bus,
then out of the east and back,
a run of negatives . . .?

Has her world changed out-and-out?
Or has she lived bound to some weird set-up—
the mule that's dragged the wheel
till it can only circumscribe,
and at a straight path must be led?
What doctor sanctioned this furlough?
Can she be circling alone?

Her hair, an edgeless haze;
under the cotton shell a stance
wandlike, almost airborne.
She rises now and then compelled
to seem to look out windows,
her face unseeing; frets with
her large dark purse and, at her feet,
black plastic trash bag with twist tie.

Within her trance she's spotted
two seats across from me;
abandons a sleeping Mexican,
taking her plastic bag, and sits alone.

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Her garment's flowered. Her soles
inside flat sandals, old rubber
weathered to chapped rose.
She takes off twist-it, rapt;
opens the bag, peers in,
cautiously shifting things, removing nothing,
arm elbow deep, like one engaged in calving;
takes out—can it be, more folded plastic bags
blistered with use? . . . *Not those.*
And something coarse and white—dish towel?
Change of underwear? *Not that.*
She is alone, absorbed;
she's in some way-off house,
a mansion long devoid of lords;
or a big empty room
with towering windows—
even a small empty room—
alone, so alone one wonders
where she is going TO, who
has room enough for that loneness, that quiet.
Yet not where she is going
but where she came from.

Now she slides out a worn,
staghandled paring knife;
the thin blade's longish.
She drifts it out and puts it by,
restores the bags and piece of cloth,
fastens the twist-it patiently,
then moves back to the Mexican.
By now he's taken over her seat, too.
She almost sits on him.
He jumps awake, his look a reprimand.
Remotely. . . . *cuse.* . . . Then
her being seems to vanish.
Her head repeats its back-and-forth.
The knife rides in the seat across from me
detached, in menace.

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I check the other passengers,
the ones who turn and eye her anxiously,
for one in charge of her.
Perhaps the Mexican's her keeper.
He seems to feel no threat.
Abruptly she investigates her skirt,
looks quickly backward to the seat she's left;
not rising, reaches back,
arm stretching crazily
till like a magnet it's pulled-in the knife.
She draws it to her lap, sits straight (that's done).
Again the metronome
that drums no tune—
no
no
no

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Two Poems by Charles Simic

Bread

Stale hunk
Left for us
On a plate

Dinnertime.
Clever sister
Tucked *it*
Into a sock,

Teeth-marks intact.
She tied a red ribbon
Halfway between
The head and the heart.

Rocked the babe,
Who cried, hollered
For a brother:
The little one

Pale as lint
Under the high
And empty bed.

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The Big War

We played war during the war,
Margaret. Toy soldiers were in demand,
The kind made from clay.
The lead ones were used for bullets—

Perhaps? The clay ones so beautifully
Molded and colored, I used to get down
On the floor to look them in the eye.
I remember their own look of wonder.

How strange it must have been
To find themselves standing at attention
Before a large creature
With a moustache made of milk.

At times they broke, or I broke them.
There was wire inside their limbs,
Inside their chest, but nothing in the head,
Margaret. I made sure.

Nothing in the head. Perhaps—
An arm, an officer's arm
Wielding a saber deep down in the cracks
Of my grandmother's floor?

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Carolyn Kizer

Gerda

Gud, som haver barnen kär,
Se till mig som liten är.
Vart jag mig i världen vänder
Står min lycka i Guds händer.
—Old Swedish children's prayer

Down the long curving walk you trudge to the street,
Stoop-shouldered in defeat, a cardboard suitcase
In each hand. *Gerda, don't leave!* the child cries
From the porch, waving and weeping; her stony mother
Speaks again of the raise in salary
Denied. Gerda demands ten dollars more
Than the twenty-five a month she has been paid
To sew, cook, keep house, dress and undress the child,
Bathe the child with the rough scaly hands
she cleans in Clorox; sing to the child
In Swedish, teach her to pray, to count her toes
In Swedish. Forty years on, the child still knows how,
Is a great hit with children under seven, in Sweden,
Singing a folk song, praying, counting toes.
For twenty-five dollars a month in 1933
Gerda makes for the child her favorite, *fattigmand*,
A mix of flour, milk and eggs you cut in strips,
Then fry in fat, then dust with sugar
(the child helps Gerda cook so she knows that).
In Stockholm the child will inquire of *fattigmand*,
But like lost Gerda it does not exist.

Deep in the Depression, the child fears for her
As Gerda trudges down the walk, four blocks to the bus,
Then the train to Minneapolis. *What will she do?*

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Gerda, trained as a nurse, found no work before
She came to us. Twenty-five dollars a month
To sew a quilt for the child, covered with fabulous
Animals feather-stitched in blue and white;
Now after fifty years it hangs on the wall
Of the child's grandchild, in a Chicago house.
Then, when the child awoke, addled and drunk with
nightmare,
She dragged the quilt from her cot,
Stumbled sniffling into Gerda's room,
To be taken into her bed, soothed back to sleep
By the rough, antiseptic hands.

The child wakes up to naked light.
Ageless Gerda's steel-grey bob shakes into place
(she owns no mirror);
Blind Gerda gropes for her steel-rimmed spectacles
As the child sees, with fascinated love,
The curd in the corner of each of Gerda's eyes.
It is a magic substance the child has improvised
On a favorite tale: Hans Christian Andersen's
Snow Queen. She thinks of it as the good cream curd,
The reverse of the splinter in the eye
of little Kay: everyone, like the brave child in the story,
Everyone like Gerda.

Modest Gerda dresses in the closet,
Then the two on tip-toe steal to the child's room
So the stout handsome mother will not waken.
Then Gerda bathes the child, scrubs her hard all over
With the loofah, dries her carefully on the big warm towel,
Pulls on her panties of white cotton, then the dress,
Smelling deliciously of Gerda's iron, the dress
Gerda smocked at night while the household slept,
Then the pastel sweater Gerda knitted her.
The child sits on the edge of the bed while Gerda
Brushes then twists the child's fair hair
Into two fat braids secured with rubber bands.

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The child, so much fairer than her parents, nearly believes
She's Swedish; is pleased then, and forty years on
To be taken for Scandinavian: Gerda's own.
Now Gerda pulls up the white anklets, fastens the sandals.
Down to the pantry!—where the child climbs into her chair.
Gerda sets three places, one for the child,
One for the child's imaginary playmate, one for her.
And they eat the lovely oatmeal Gerda cooked the night before.

Thirty years on, her father will remark,
Your mother was jealous
So we let her go. Of course I could have raised her wages,
Gerda ran the house! The child's throat fills with bile
As, casually, he continues: *I always let your mother*
Decide these matters. Smug, he often used that phrase
As if the abdication of his fatherhood
Had been a sacrifice. What did he know
Of the child's needs or passions?
So Gerda left the house, the yard, the garden,
The child's home long torn down,
A place that no longer exists.
Thirty-five years on, the child stumbles among the weeds
In search of the path down which her Gerda walked
Or a trace of the porch where she once stood, bereft.

The child's eighth year, like Gerda, disappeared.
Hazy recall of illness:
Asthma, the wheeze, the struggle for breath,
And the louder rhythmic wheeze of oxygen . . .
Of the weeks in bed, lying inert, nothing remains,
Only the pallid joys of recovery,
Jello and milk, ice-cream three times a day
(was this a bribe?);
Dreamily sucking a spoonful of melting vanilla:
Only these splinters of a vanished year.

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It must have been then that the ice-house dream began,
Her first and last recurring dream:
The child stands in a little room of ice;
Outside a song begins, impossibly nostalgic,
Played on a concertina or harmonium.
As the dream goes on
Slowly, slowly the walls move in, the ceiling presses down
Till she is encased in a kind of upright coffin
Of milky iridescent ice. Entranced by a vision
Of green hills and pure blue skies without,
She conceives freedom and flight!
She must memorize the tune as the ice moves in
To touch her on every side and on her head.
As the last, haunting note is played
The child wakes up. Of course the tune is gone.
It is always gone.

For ten years the child nurtures a secret plan:
At last she boards a train for the east,
Waits for the layover in Minneapolis,
Hurries to a pay-phone, armed with change,
Opens the directory,
Faints to see four columns, closely printed,
Of Gerda Johnsons. *How could there be more than one*?
Ranging her nickels on the metal counter,
She calls from the top
As the hands of the clock spin round.
Gerda! Gerda! Half-a-page
With answers none, or ancient whispery Norse voices
Down a tunnel of years, and oceans crossed
And cold home villages abandoned long ago.
Then she runs out of change and time. A train to catch.
She weeps at terminated hope, nourished so long,
As the old film strip runs again:

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Gerda, you trudge down the walk forever;
The child, no matter how she calls and cries,
Cannot catch up.
Now from another life she summons you
Out of the earth or aether, wherever you are,
Gerda, come back, to nurse your desolate child.

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Douglas Crase

Dog Star Sale

Now the universe wants to be known for
Itself, isn't that why we're here
Popped out on this terrace the color of stars
The red ones like gentrified brick

Lucky for us
It takes money to even imagine
Such things and this, for parsecs around
Is the one place where money is made
Though not everyone has it, not even here
The burden is on those who do
Which we freely take up
A volitional duty to curate the spheres
After how many misfired suns
And misapplied genes
How many millions fed to despair
Before we were brought to the task
Thankless, that cannot be failed

Just to think of it
Sometimes engenders a chill
So thorough the planet's own breath
Will draw back on its bones
And there in that vault sucked by fear
One has shivered at twinkles of something
Not normally shown. It explains
The wide pupils and why I protect them
When doing so keeps me from you
All involved on the earth with your chores
Of pollution and likely never to pause
Let alone practice
What we've observed: as far as you touch
Other worlds, that much you save yours

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Laura Mullen

The Surface

Sudden cold or the sudden sense of having been cold for a long time
He said he was getting back some things that had been lost like what
Love oh great looking out across the river he wouldn't meet my eyes either
Something flashed up and fell back down into the water there look no
I told him about the time I saw them feeding the crowd up out
Of the dark water of paler mouths opening closing like what
Getting the strength to say lost he was beautiful the play
Of the muscle I make you tense don't I just under the tan skin of his jaw
I keep coming back to the surface of delicate skin the shadows
Just under the surface that river your wrist I must have
Pressing my mouth I can't look at your hands thinking of how you
Touched me hurt you a lot love like what those memories
Saying you're wearing mallard colors after I chased to frighten
For no reason the ducks because I can't stand still enough if I could
I would be so still you would think I would never hurt you
Screaming what was her last name what was her name
The wind-scarred surface of the water
What I'm not allowed to feel what I'm not allowed to say pressing up
As though feeding my heart is everywhere under my skin

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And rising up to the surface of the water clenching and
unclenching
The thick grey muscle and dense shoal of fish brought to
just beneath
The surface the grotesque bouquet of their rapidly
blossoming and
Shutting the crowd but as if behind glass so there was no
sound
Of people screaming I feel helpless and cold saying please
believe
I did not mean to hurt you you could say that to me too
in *Orphée*
The poet presses against the mirror which wavers like water
which lets him in

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Ian Ganassi

Partial Explanation

Like the bells
That could be ringing out of heaven now
For all my ears can tell,
Or the number of their strokes,

This photo of a highly realistic painting
Of two palms by the sea
Is full of vague suggestions.

Here, in an arid land of leisure,
The water, ocean-green,
Licks up toward the palms.
A fossil skeleton
Of large brown stones
Arches onto land,
Pointing out the space between them.
The right tree bows
Toward the tiny red-clad figure of a girl
Wading into the sea.
The sand is desert-brown
And thirst provoking.

These bells could be
An immense buoy
Swinging out of sight.

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And this photo could be
The thing itself,
Twice removed,
An image of an image of the sun,
Precise, accomplished;

Or a veil like a face—
A parable, a pun, an allegory—
Covering a world of correspondence.

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Eileen Myles

Mad Pepper

I wonder if anything really needs to be revived.
Mad magazine should probably be dead by 1984
rather than: $2.50 CHEAP. It's difficult
to impossible to just buy pepper. You
can get a vast amount on sale for $2.99
an exquisite amount for $1.49—nicely packaged
like a spice but it's just pepper. The tall
waiter leans over and says: Would you like
some freshly ground pepper on your salad?
Oh yes. Leaning over to my companion—
Oh, this is nice. Dan recommends I go
to MeadowSweet and get some special Lesbian
Pepper. Pepper's male I snort. I want
some cheap male pepper. *The Village Voice*
made me miserable, that damp scuzzy paper
those endless articles I should really
read and when I do I know less, wasted
a night or a morning. I boldly returned
and exchanged the *Voice* for *Mad '84*,
at least it's a pleasure owning that
silly gloss and will be entertained
at least once thinking: *Mad's* not the same
as it used to be. Tennis anyone? The
margin was the best. Why don't women
have back-room bars? It just wouldn't
work, that's why. Pepper's male,
sea salt's female, it takes longer
to gather, waiting for the ocean
to dry up and come back, overwhelmed by
the immensity of it. It's nice to have

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a friend like you to sit on the shore
with. Maybe I'll bring some pepper.
From MeadowSweet. I seek adventure
today. Wound up in a hardware
store, a meeting, superette &
a bodega looking for pepper. First
today I craved cheese, then (now) I crave
fish, some sushi to go, it's cheaper,
quick, broke again but I got my tools:
Spackle pan roller, Scotch-brite pads
Ajax, all strong names, I look strong,
I must be strong. I bought Lotto,
I left early thinking I would meet
the thing in the street, I met Leonard
bumped into Tom in a coffee shop, that
was the thought, got confused in a
hardware store, the help looked junked
out, I had to pee, walked back to
the coffee shop, asked for the
key, but the door was open. Oh, *yes*,
I got my hair cut today on Astor
Place, near the mall, where the pathetic
belongings of all are sold. Again &
again. Poverty's an ocean. I bought
a pen, a red one, reddish orange.
What do you think of the Lower East Side
Art Scene. Oh I don't know I guess
it's great. I mean I'm not connected,
I just bumped into a guy I know is
successful. He says he's trying to
not let it affect him, but still
I wondered if I said the right thing.
I think it's nice the neighborhood
looks different so I don't have to
move and my apartment's worth more.
So now I have to paint it because
the face is depressing, the face
of poverty. You said it's female

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didn't you? That the face of poverty
is female which is a good line. It sounds
like a good line, but it takes more than
sound to make a good line. If you could
put real truth in a line it would never
be a good line. That's a good line.
It sounds true, doesn't it. A good
line sounds true.

Pepper's male is a good line.
But that's because it sounds
more like a place, Pepper's Mail.
I live in Pepper's Mail, New Jersey,
it distorts. It looks like it's going to rain.
Big things probably sound small at first.
Someone asks you for something and it
sounds really unimportant: Give me some
poems, I'd like to translate them into
Serbo-Croatian. Sure. Hound me, Bitch.
Later you get a post-card from Beograd
& you realize she wasn't kidding.
There could be a statue of me in the City Square
by now. Next time someone says pass me the
pepper, give it to them fast. I'm shy about
asking for things. I could sit at the table
dying but I can't get the necessary eye con-
tact from over there to ask for the butter.
I start saying, well you don't really need
it. That's right, pushing my beans around
merrily passing everything even my fork
to anyone who looks up in a flash. The strongest
things I know . . . humidity, fire-crackers, hunger,
the capacity of trees to grow leaves, it's what I
see when I'm looking around, I miss you so
much, but you are not the strongest thing
right now but what I see. Against a brick wall
a woman with one of the most beautiful bodies
I have ever seen drapes herself against three

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dark sisters who carry her apparently in
something called Bewegungsstudie. Motion Study
my dictionary ubersetz. I won't even tell you
what I thought, Pepperhead. Thursday, August
2nd. Some part of me is always quietly counting.
I think that is a good line. Stooges Anonymous.
Beverly Ipswich Rockport. A train schedule
I carried when I got on the wrong train.

The red light continues to blink on my answering
machine and I stepped out ages ago to pick
up a coke and some pepper, some cigarettes
Handy-wipes, I love them, and everything changed
it will never come back that clear single in-
tention, though it seems there were two or three.

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The City, Seen from the Water, 1924

Joan Silber

Pauline had forgotten about the straw seats on the train. She had a half-hour's ride from Newark to the Hoboken ferry terminal, and the moment she took her seat she was attacked through her clothing by a vicious meshwork of woven bristles; it was like sitting on a hair shirt. She had dressed for the heat—it was August and near ninety—and she wore a loose voile outfit which, even with her slip under it, provided very skimpy insulation against railroad upholstery.

A woman across the aisle from her had spread a newspaper under herself. Pauline had only a book of poetry with her, which she certainly wasn't going to sit on. She was seventeen and not inclined to be offhand about looking ridiculous in public. And she did think the woman looked ridiculous, settling her skirts over the paper like a hen brooding newsprint.

So she sat on one hand and fanned herself with her book.

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The train hadn't left the station yet, and outside the window she could see across the street to a theater marquee. Below it there was a poster of a couple about to kiss, a man with a pencil mustache and a woman with marcelled hair. Even from a distance the picture of their profiles leaning toward each other made her smile in recognition as though she were looking at a picture of herself. She had spent several hours the night before in the front seat of a boy's roadster while it was parked behind the playground of a grammar school. She did not think that the boy, whose name was Harry Bitt, was himself important, except as the agent of certain sensations, but she was in awe of these sensations, and she reviewed them constantly.

It was very hot, and it would be worse in New York, with its reflecting pavements and the massed crowds diffusing their own conglomerate body heat. Pauline didn't mind the weather except that she had to pull at her bangs all the time to keep them from frizzing. All summer she had been going into New York as often as they would let her, on the excuse of running errands for her father's dry goods store, picking up samples of edge-trim and dropping off orders for white cotton batiste. Her visits always pleased her and gave her a great feeling of personal superiority, although they involved a lot of aimless walking in tight shoes, and she generally got lost at some point toward the end of the day; once an oily-haired man in a plaid coat had followed her for blocks, calling out, "You want a map, doll?"

The train began to move, jolting forward so that Pauline was jerked across the raspy seat; then it stopped and began again. Outside the window there was a constant dull flow of scenery—flat-fronted brick buildings. Once they were out of Newark these gave way to a bare and marshy flatland, like a giant vacant lot. Along the horizon there were water towers and crows flying. Pauline liked this part, which gave her a sense of traversing the steppes or the moors, some bleak European wastes.

She took up her book, which she thought she should read since she had brought it with her. It was a copy of Baudelaire

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in French, and Pauline's French wasn't nearly good enough to read most of it without a dictionary, but she knew some of the shorter poems almost by heart, and she moved her lips over the phrases. In her room at home she read them aloud in a languid chant, trying to absorb into her own personality something of the poem's atmosphere of sonorous corruption, and rehearsing her own allegiance with ennui and other delicate monstrosities.

She was trying to figure out what the word "*chevelure*" meant when the lines "*luxe, calme, et volupté*" started her thinking about Harry Bitt again and sent her back into that smug nostalgia staying on as aftermath from the night before. She did not resist; she intended to keep thinking about it as much as possible. He was a pale, soft-faced boy, smooth and blond, who went in for soothing hugs and fluttery kisses. With encouragement, a more serious and urgent side of him showed itself, and it was the fact of having worked this transformation in him which lingered most powerfully in her imagination. She kept going over the exact sequence of it; she wanted, if anything, more mental repetition, a more insistent record, since the experience had otherwise all the vagueness of the invisible, witnessed, after all, with her eyes closed. It was to rescue all of it from the blurred realm of private evidence that she always reported everything that happened on dates to her friend Bunny, but these were only lists and lacked the audacious nuance of the real thing.

When Bunny listened to Pauline's descriptions of what happened with Harry (in June it had been Ray) her eyes glistened; she asked intelligent and sometimes peculiar questions. Pauline liked explaining, but she felt there was something too soft, too romantic, in Bunny's attitude.

Still they were really friends—outsiders together—egging each other on in their shared scorn for the monkeyish antics that passed for hilarity in their high school. Minna Green played the piano with her feet at parties; the captain of the football team had once set a live chicken loose in the auditorium. Pauline couldn't believe the fatuousness of all this, the "rampant stupidity," as she and Bunny liked to say. It made

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them style themselves as aloof and eccentric by contrast; in class they rolled their eyes at each other across the room and passed sarcastic notes.

This avowed indifference did not, of course, make them favorites in most crowds. It was harder on Bunny, who looked so mild and blinking in her middy blouse, and who had once had a balloon filled with ink thrown at her back. Pauline was more convincing—she was a trim, nervously pretty girl, with a clear, slightly nasal voice. She had thin, peaked shoulders and carried herself well; she was also quite vain and a little too eager to be original about her appearance (today she had tied a striped ribbon around her hips for a sash, with somewhat awkward results). Older boys were sometimes drawn to her; she had that slyly knowing look when she was being quick and satirical (always flattering when you were not the target) and a sudden, fresh smile.

The train entered a tunnel and everything went dark inside the car for several minutes; Pauline sat upright, watching the rows of lights bob past the windows. The sensation of this got mingled with the constant physical remembrance of Harry, and she was feeling excited and reckless. The train came out into daylight and passed through the Hoboken trackyards, where it stopped short. The breeze that had been coming through the windows died instantly; all the passengers were sighing and blotting their faces and plucking at their clothing to let the air in, as they lined up to get off. A conductor on the platform reached up to help her step down; he was a fat, white-haired man, who put his hands under her arms, touching her breasts: on purpose, she thought.

She was startled but not angry, since it seemed to her that anyone might want to do that, and it was over in an instant. She followed the crowd through the station—with its great domed ceiling and its dingy skylight—out to the street and across to the ferry dock. The boat was already waiting—a boxy wooden hulk with peeling paint; beyond the glare of the water, the skyline of the city loomed very flat and close, as though she could swim there if she were dressed for it. As soon as the entrance chain was unhooked, she found a seat on deck.

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Pauline stood up when the boat got under way. The light cloth of her dress got pressed flat against her stomach and legs, and flapped behind her like a sail. Everyone else was sitting down, blinking as though the wind were too much for them, which made her feel very blithe and sturdy, a spirited young thing braving the elements. Near the railing, her face got misted and wet, and she backed away because of her hair.

When she walked out into the Twenty-Third Street Ferry Terminal, she tugged at her dress to pull it down, and a man who was standing under the clock tower smiled at her. She laughed slightly, to show that she was amused at having been caught grooming herself. He said, "Did you ever think about being a model?"

He was about thirty (too old for her), a tall man in a straw hat and a summer suit. "You've certainly got the face for it,"he said. Pauline said thank you. He was almost good-looking, except that his freckles made his skin appear splotchy and irritated, and his Adam's apple was too large. "I mean a designer's model," he said. "You didn't think I meant an artist's model, did you?"

"Oh, no," Pauline said.

"The designers are hiring ones like you now, brunettes with little faces, not these horsey blondes. You ever hear of a designer Jean Patou?" He pronounced it more or less correctly, with a soft *j* and the last name a twangy approximation, Patoo as in Sweet Patooty. "My friend is hiring for him now. He should see you. You could make a lot of money."

"I wouldn't do it for the money," Pauline said.

"It would come in handy, though, right?"

Pauline had heard—who had not?—of girls being "discovered" in odd places, of their piquant expressions and unforgettable complexions striking the commercial hearts of impresarios. She would not have said she wanted to be a model; she had pictured something more singular and Bohemian for herself; she wanted to enter, somehow, a circle of people who did artistic and outrageous things, and to be admired by them, to be famous for being with them. It struck her that being a model would have its own seductive cachet even under

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those circumstances; no matter what people said, they always wanted to know women like that.

"Do you always wear your hair this way?" he said. "We could just comb it flatter—it's a little messed up now, isn't it?" Pauline had tried pulling spit-curls down over her cheeks, and she was disappointed that he thought these weren't deliberate but she stood still while he brushed them back with his hand and said, "Don't want to hide that face."

"It's a clean business," he said. "There's no monkey business in it." Pauline thought it was a bit quaint of him to reassure her about that. She did not, after all, object to monkey business, as he so cutely called it. He seemed a little unsophisticated and hokey, in his seersucker suit with the pants rolled too low. His shoes were that cheap leather that looked almost orange.

"My name is Earl," he said.

"I'm Pauline Samuels." There was a little silence as they crossed the street, and Pauline asked him where he was from, which was always a good thing to ask new people.

"I've been all over the world. You won't believe me when I tell you where I just came from."

"Where?"

"Paris, France. It's wonderful there except they make you sit with Negroes in cafes and buses."

"What's wrong with that?" Pauline said.

"You're probably very idealistic," he said. "You're young."

She hated arguing with people who were so backward in their thinking. Probably he thought Sacco and Vanzetti were just a couple of hooligans too. Bunny would have given him a whole speech.

"We could go over to my friend's office," he said, "if you're not in a hurry. It's around the corner."

If they were hiring right away, she would have to say no; she wasn't graduating until next January. She walked with him down the block; he stopped in front of an office building and held the door for her to follow him inside. The lobby, which was empty, had a cracked marble floor and brown-painted molding. "Wait here," he said. "Let me go up and see if he's

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still out to lunch or if he's there." He went up the stairs and came back again in a few minutes. "He's out. You don't mind waiting?"

Pauline shook her head. He edged her under the stairwell, and then he drew her towards him and began kissing her. He said, "Ah," as though he thought she had been expecting this, which she had not, but she kissed him back, by habit, since she was proud of not being cold or timid. His tongue was much more forceful and probing than Harry's had been, a technique she did not particularly like but submitted to quietly; his friend would be arriving soon anyway. They went on kissing for a minute; then he drew back and took off his hat, which he put on the radiator. He was balding, with fine, reddish hair, wispy at the top of his head; he smoothed it down as though he were sorry she had to see it. He looked towards the door a moment; then he put his hands down under the neck of her dress, kneaded her breasts and said, "Ah," again, as though he had found something. She felt suddenly foolish and unprepared, shocked that he was really touching her bare skin, and aware that she was in a public place and that she didn't like him or find him attractive.

He kissed her very hard and eagerly again, and then he fumbled with the buttons of his trousers and pulled her hand down to touch him. Pauline had never done this before, although he seemed to think she had. She was still struck with something like physical disbelief, alarmed now, and frozen into a sort of hardened patience with herself, with her own mistake. It seemed strangest to her that her life contained this now forever; it awed her beyond everything. He moved her hand in a tightened grip, thrusting up against her, and began to shiver all over. "Is it okay?" he said. "Can I put it in?"

"No," she said.

"No?" he said, and then he let her take her hand away. She turned then so she couldn't see what he was doing; when she looked back, he was wiping at himself with a handkerchief.

"I have to go," she said. "I have to meet some people."

"Wait," he said, buttoning his pants and tucking his shirt back under his suspenders. "I'll walk you."

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He hooked his arm under her elbow, as though they were strolling through the park, and they walked out through the door of the building. The street was full of noise, busy with the stream of traffic that had been going on the whole time they were inside, and very bright in the afternoon sun. Pauline squinted as though she were coming out of a movie theatre.

"You believe in free love, don't you?" he said. "I like that. I like a free spirit."

There was an El station by the corner, and Pauline thought she could get away from him there. He said, "Meet me here next Saturday, okay?"

"I can't come into New York any more. I'm not going to be able to for the rest of the summer."

"I could meet you in Hoboken, if you want. Your parents wouldn't have to know. They wouldn't like me, would they? You don't think I'm too old for you, do you?" Pauline shrugged.

He took out an envelope and asked her to write her phone number on it. She gave him a number with one digit wrong, let him kiss her again, and walked up the stairs to the El entrance.

There was a moment while she fumbled for a nickel in her purse when she heard someone running up the stairs after her, but it was only a boy in knickers who pushed ahead of her at the turnstile. She waited at the platform with the others, and no one even looked at her or noticed her especially. When the train came, she took the first seat, next to a woman with an infant in her lap.

She got off at Penn Station, and went at once to the ladies' room, where she spent time hiking up her garters and washing her face. Her eyes looked terrible—all hang-dog and watery like Bunny's—but she put on powder, which made her cheeks less flushed and swollen, and she pulled the spit-curls down again. She walked out into the station until she found a lunch counter, and she sat with her purse and her book balanced on her lap and read the menu, but no one came to wait on her. There didn't even seem to be anyone behind the counter, although other people were eating. She felt clumsy and winc-

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ing, laughably timid in all her gestures. A counter boy with crooked teeth came over to her finally, and she ordered a lemonade, and drank it down quickly.

When she walked outside again, it had begun to rain. It was only a light rain, which cooled the air and made a soothing, rushing sound on the pavement, but she was wet by the time it was over, and she had to walk the rest of the way with great splotches on the front of her dress, which looked lewdly comical, as though something private had leaked through her clothing.

The office of Art Style Trim was on the second floor, and as soon as she opened the door, a man who was standing up talking to the receptionist called out, "It's the orphan of the storm here. What's the matter, honey, your boyfriend doesn't love you enough to buy you an umbrella?"

A tiny, leathery man in rimless glasses who was sitting on one of the armchairs said, "What are you, testing the fabric to see if it runs? That's it, right? I know."

They were salesmen. The older man in fact looked like someone she had seen in offices since she was a child, although she wasn't sure. Pauline hated on principle the heartiness of salesmen, their constant bantering to pass the time, but she sometimes flirted with them to show them they hadn't gotten the best of her. Today she just nodded her head at them; let them think she was shy, a sodden, mincing little thing. She could tell already that was what they thought. They had gone back to talking to the receptionist, a beefy woman with fierce eyebrows and shrimp-colored rouge.

Pauline's errand was to pick up an order of soutache braid. This would come rolled on a large wheel, and she had planned to stop for it later in the day, since there was nothing to do but go home once she was carrying it. The receptionist told her to take a seat and wait for Mr. Gittelson, who was out.

She took a chair in the corner, next to a wall papered with silhouettes of black swans holding funereal loops of black ribbon in their beaks. The salesmen went back to playing a game of cards, and Pauline picked up a copy of a business magazine and flipped through it. The magazine made her feel vexed and

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vaguely tearful, and she had to put it down, although the encounter in the hallway had left her feeling leaden and dazed, the opposite of weepy.

She waited for a long time, an hour at least, hearing the slapping of the playing cards against the tables and the salesmen's voices. Once it seemed to her that they were saying, "Woes are wild," which could not be right but she let it pass, another piece of oddness from the crackling surface of the world.

By the time she heard the click of the office door opening, her dress had dried where it was stretched between her knees. "Here he is," the receptionist said, "the man of the hour." Pauline had always thought that Mr. Gittelson was handsome in a bearish way. When he saw her, he said, "Paulie," and then, "So did they give you coffee while you were waiting? A glass of water even? Nothing, right?"

"I was fine," she said.

Mr. Gittelson pinched and wiggled the end of her nose. "A sweetheart." Then he went into the back office. When he returned, a boy came with him carrying the roll of braid wrapped in brown paper. Pauline tore one corner of the package to make sure it was the right kind. "Look at this," Mr. Gittelson said. "She looks before she leaps. This is a very intelligent girl here. You could all of you learn something."

"My father would kill me if I didn't look," Pauline said.

"You're a lovely girl," Mr. Gittelson said. "Your kind I would hire in a minute."

Pauline said, "Thank you," and then she smiled a little. She was thinking, with some appreciation of the irony, that it was the second time that day someone had "offered" her a job. Mr. Gittelson, who thought she was smirking with pleasure at being praised, kissed her on the cheek before she left, rubbing his mustache against her.

On the way back, she had to sit on the lower deck of the ferry so that her package wouldn't get wet; the air was close and smelled of gasoline from the motors. When she boarded the train, she dozed off almost at once. Once she dreamed

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someone was holding a fur hat over her face and stifling her, and she woke feeling frightened and vaguely ashamed.

When she got off at the Newark station, the downtown streets were thick with people going home from work or shopping. She walked for blocks, shifting her bundle, which was heavy and left marks on her arms.

At home they were already sitting down to dinner; from a block away Pauline could see the yellow light of the citronella candles set out on the screened porch at the side of the house, where they took their meals in hot weather. Pauline rapped on the screen door, and her mother called out from her seat, "We gave up waiting for you already." The porch room seemed very bright and tensely cheerful, with the pink glass plates and the ugly metal fruitbowl and the tablecloth printed with drawings of bananas and sombreros. Solly, who was twelve, banged his fork against the juice pitcher and said, "Time and supper wait for no man." There was cold roast chicken and Harvard beets. Pauline ate slowly, with some pleasure in the tastes but no appetite. She felt as though she had been traveling for a long time; her legs ached, and things were dry in her mouth.

Solly, who had gotten a haircut from his father that day, kept licking his finger and dabbing the back of his neck. He was bleeding in spots from where the clippers had nicked the scalp. "Stop already," his mother said. "Don't touch."

Pauline's father went on gnawing his chicken with that private, inward gaze he had when he was chewing. When they were little and he was angry with them, he used to shake them rather than hit them—which was worse, Pauline thought, because there was that hideous feeling of your head rolling over and over in rhythm, as though you were helping.

Her mother said, "You got wet in the rain, right? Next time you'll wear a hat." Pauline had a straw skimmer which she wouldn't wear because it looked like a shellacked waffle.

Solly said, "Ease-play ass-pay the ickles-pay." Pauline reached across and passed the relish dish because she knew she was the only one who would bother to translate.

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Her mother was pouring salt now on a spot where beet juice had gotten on her lap. She wore a kerchief tied around her head in a turban, as she did whenever she was in the house. Sometimes she kept it on even when she was in the store waiting on customers. Her looks were marred by an underbite—a jutting chin like a terrier's—which made her say her *s*'s too thickly. She was cautious by nature—afraid of elevators and uncooked vegetables and drafts in bedrooms—but having come from Europe as a bride of twenty, she had lived for so many years in a state of half-understanding and misapprehension that she had grown shy and hesitant and peevish about her opinions. Her English was not good, and had it been up to her, she would not have gone out of the house at all. Every child on the block could imitate the way she said her own name—Mrs. Shemuels—they would suck in their lips and click their front teeth together. Sometimes Pauline and Solly did it too, beyond her hearing.

Pauline's father said, "Leave the stain on your dress alone. We'll say you were murdered and sell it for a bundle." Months before, he had read in the newspaper that the clothing Abraham Lincoln had on when he was assassinated had been sold at auction for $6500 and this had struck him as so fantastical—an example of enterprise carried to extremes of splendidly grim cleverness—that he brought it up at every turn. He would cough into a handkerchief and hand it to one of the children, here, go sell it when I'm dead.

He said to Pauline, "You got the right ribbon, right?" Pauline pointed to the package, which she had set in the corner of the porch.

Her mother said, "So long as she didn't bring back any rotten berries this time." This was a reference to Pauline's having purchased—on Bleecker Street, two weeks ago at least—a basket of blueberries which had looked very tempting but which had turned out to be soft and spoiled on the bottom. "Miss Millionaire," her mother said. "So you know to look first, then buy?"

"I didn't buy anything this time," Pauline said.

"She learned her lesson," her mother said. Solly rolled his

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eyes; they did go on about things. Pauline had been made to eat the berries as an instructive exercise, although she had not really minded. She was used to them at home, the way they were fixed and strict about some things and blindly lenient about others.

Pauline had stopped listening anyway. She was thinking about the ferry slip and how the man had seemed better-looking and more intelligent at first; she still had that preoccupation with going over the details as though she could correct them by thinking about them. Her mother was talking about how they should have reported the fruit seller to the police. It struck Pauline that, for all her parents' suspicions, they were full of ignorance about the way things were (which made her feel rather spitefully sorry for them). At the store her mother was always watching old ladies picking over the notions counter, sure that they were going to steal the needle packets. They understood greed, but the rest made no sense to them. Pauline thought of the man Earl (that was probably not really his name) wiping himself with a handkerchief, desperate and methodical, as though he were following some habit of hygiene repeated often before. This went on all the time; the world was full of this. She had kissed him, which made her flinch back in her chair now.

She sat up straight again, but no one was looking at her anyway. Her mother was complaining about how mosquitoes got through the holes in the screen, and Solly was saying they could eat his beets if they wanted, hurry up, come eat. Pauline did not dislike her family at this moment—she was quite relieved, after all, to be back in the house—but they seemed very distant and at the same time their voices were very loud.

The phone rang then, a long metallic rattle. Maybe Earl had figured out the right digit, or she had written down the right number without thinking. Her father went into the kitchen and she could hear him saying, "Yes?" (that was how he greeted people in the store too—yes instead of can I help you?). It was for the other family on their party line. When he came back he said, "What did you think, it was your friend Mr. Harry?"

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Pauline did the dishes while her parents sat in the living room listening to the radio, to a concert of the Philharmonic Orchestra playing Rimsky-Korsakov. The music sounded stiff and silly, with its swelling rushes and dying falls. It annoyed Pauline and made her utterly sure that she was on the other side of things, dry and unfeeling and modern. She began swabbing the dishes in time, as a sort of joke to herself, dipping and lifting them out of the suds on the soaring beat. Next time she went into the city she would put tape on the backs of her heels so she didn't get blisters. She didn't really mind kitchen work; she had tied the apron, which was much too big for her, with the strings crossed twice around her waist so she looked tightly bodiced like a tavern wench. She had to heat up another kettle when the water got cold; and although she had been hot all day, she put a dish towel over her head and leaned her face over the spout, because she had heard that the steam was good for her complexion.

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Picasso's Women

A Portfolio from the Collection of Marina Picasso

Pablo Picasso died in 1973 without a will, leaving his wondrous personal estate to be divided among his heirs and the French government. The latter made its selection first. Because Picasso had never given gifts of artwork during his lifetime to his granddaughter Marina Picasso (the daughter of Paulo, Picasso's son with his first wife, the Russian ballerina Olga Koklova) she was given the right to select next. With the aid and representation of art dealer Jan Krugier, she acquired about twenty-two percent of her grandfather's enormous private collection, thus instantly becoming the owner of one of the great assemblages of Picassos in the world—paintings, drawings, sculptures, prints, ceramics, and notebooks ranging from 1895 to 1973. Jan Krugier spent months making his selections for Marina. The experience made up, in a way, for the one time he had met Picasso in the fifties. "I was brought by a Spanish friend of mine who, like me, had been in the concentration camps," he recalls. "I came with some drawings of my own war experiences to show Picasso. But I was too frightened and shy. I hardly said a word. My Spanish friend was furious. I was paralyzed with fear. Perhaps that is what happens when you come face to face with such extraordinary genius—a one person musée extraordinaire."

The following selection from Marina Picasso's collection, accompanied by notes by James Barron, focuses on Picasso's women—a leitmotif of his work, a constant inspiration. It is the first time this work has been reproduced in the United States. All works by Picasso are reproduced courtesy of Jan Krugier Fine Art, New York.

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Picasso first visited Paris in October, 1900. In 1901, after briefly returning to his native Barcelona, he settled in Paris at 130, boulevard de Clichy (the studio of his recently-deceased friend, Casagemas). There Picasso developed a painterly, expressionist style resonant with deep psychological intonation and concerned with the underside of the city: the brothels, bars, and dance halls he had seen in reproductions of the work of Toulouse-Lautrec and Théophile Steinlen while still in Barcelona.

In **Nu couché** (1901, Chinese ink and colored ink washes), the nude woman is most likely of the demi-monde. She appears both threatened and threatening, her passivity emphasized by her immobilized hands and feet while her predatory nature is evident in her erotic gaze. The subject of the prostitute, which recalls the reclining nude in Manet's *Olympia*, would become a recurrent theme in Picasso's work, most notably in the revolutionary *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Picasso is drawn here to the nude, yet his pen does not admire her contours: he exposes lumps and rolls, the scars of wear. The field surrounding her is described with quick vertical hatch marks, at once Edenic and hellish.

During the Barcelona years, most of the artist's works were signed "P. Ruiz Picasso," indicating the surnames of his father's and mother's families respectively. By 1901, the year he drew *Nu couché*, he was signing the maternal "Picasso," an Italian name probably adopted during the family's migration to Spain.

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Ocracoke Island

Alice Adams

Tall and too thin, sometimes stooped but now bent bravely forward into the wind, old Duncan Elliott heads southward in Central Park, down a steep and cindery path—his scattered, shamed and tormented mind still alert to the avoidance of dangerously large steel baby carriages, and runners (he must not be run down by babies or by runners, he cautions himself), but most of his thoughts are concentrated on the question of comparative evils: of all that has befallen him lately, and particularly today, what is worse—or rather, which is worst of all? To have been abandoned by one's fourth and one had hoped final wife, or to have made a total fool of one's self discussing that event, even trying as it were to explain it away.

Duncan is a distinguished professor, now an emeritus at a large midwestern university (for all the good that is doing him now); his wife Cath left the month before, in hot September; disconsolately travelling to New York, in part to cheer himself up, along with some publishing business, Duncan forgot the possibility of chill late October breezes.

Or—he continues his plaintive litany—is the worst thing of all to have broken off and lost an old, much filled and refilled

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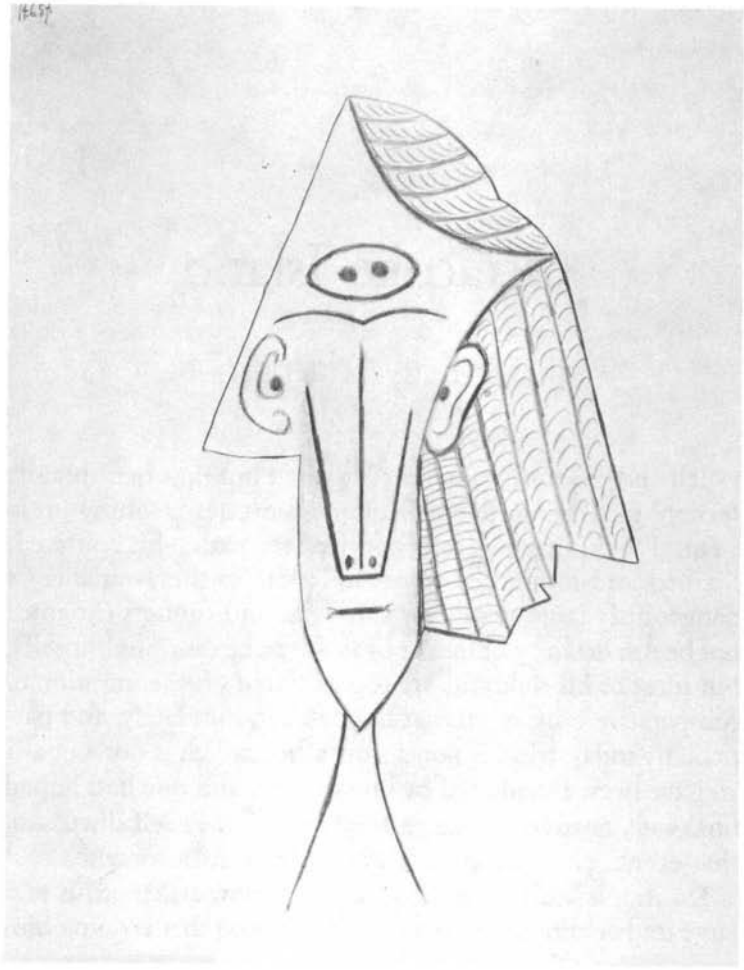

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In 1953, Françoise Gilot left Picasso and took their children, Claude and Paloma, with her. The following year, he met Jacqueline Roque, with whom he would spend the rest of his life. She freed him of the mundane daily responsibilities by assuming the chores of cook, secretary, driver, photographer, and confidante. She freed him to produce the last great works. The couple lived in the villa "La Californie" in Cannes until they married in 1961 and settled in the chateau Nôtre Dame de Vie in Mougins.

The stiff, frontal view and cut-out facial features in **Personnage** (1957, pencil on paper), an abstraction of Jacqueline's features, is reminiscent of the sheet-metal cut-out sculptures of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This work is clearly related to the sixty-foot *Tête de femme* in the plaza of the Chicago Civic Center. Both feature mane-like hair, owl eyes, and elongated noses.

The predominant snout of Picasso's afghan, Kaboul, is to be seen in the center of Jacqueline's face. Dogs' muzzles appear throughout his work, most notably in the war-time Dora Maar paintings in which the afghan, Kasbek, was his subject. Picasso remarked to Roland Penrose, "the two most important models during these years . . . were Kasbek and Dora Maar."[6]

—**James Barron**

6. Sir Roland Penrose, *Picasso: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 278.

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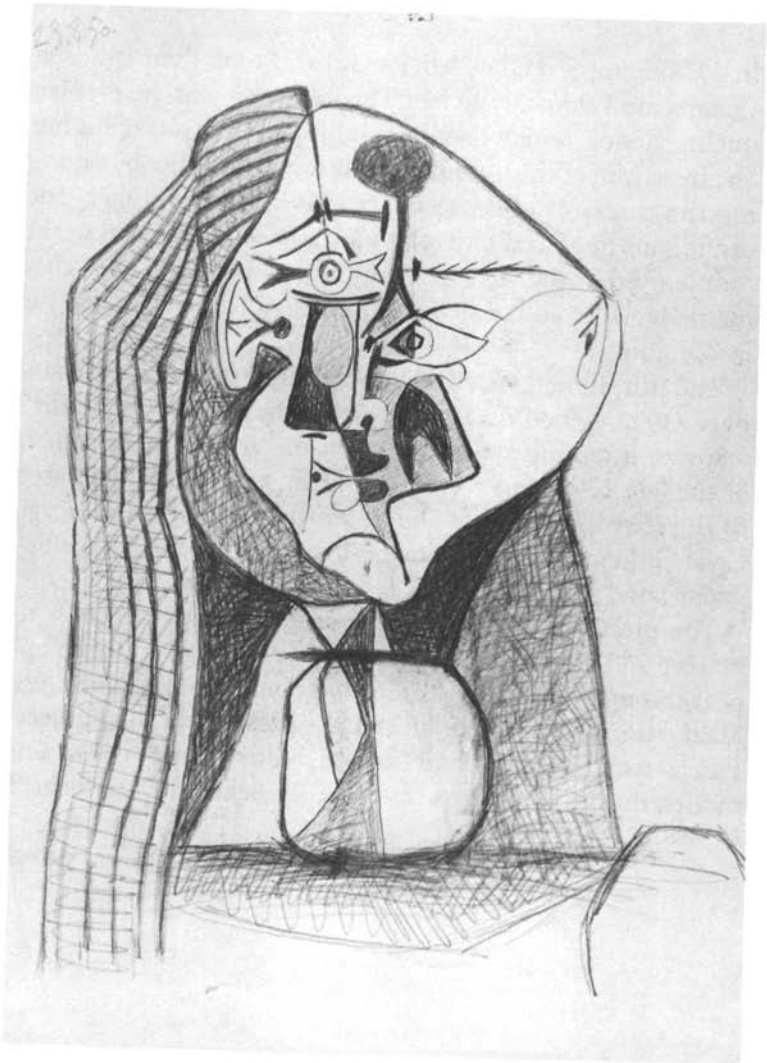

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In the fall of 1945, a young painter named Françoise Gilot entered Picasso's life. By the following year they were living together and summering in Antibes and Golf-Juan. In 1947 their son, Claude, was born, and two years later their daughter, Paloma.

To Picasso, Françoise's face lent itself to geometric abstraction; he often schematized her features into arcs and crescents. **Portrait** (1950, pencil on paper), certainly of Françoise, is composed of quirky, totemic shapes. By 1950, Picasso and Françoise had spent a large part of two years in the ancient ceramic town of Vallauris; his interest in assembled sculpture increased. *Portrait* clearly relates to sculpture: the head sits upon a base-like neck and is overtly three-dimensional.

Picasso's habit, in the late works, of incorporating his own portrait with those of others is evident in *Portrait*. The left eye appears to be that of an owl, an animal Picasso often used in this period to represent himself. He found and kept a crippled owl while in Antibes; he was fascinated by the owls during his night-time strolls in Menerbes. The artist personified himself as the owl—old, wise and nocturnal. From his early years he had painted nights and slept until mid-day.

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In the summer of 1936, Picasso left Paris for a house in Mougins near Cannes, where he met the young photographer, Dora Maar. He had known of her through her affiliation with the Surrealists; he had agreed earlier in the year to let her photograph his studio. Picasso's intellectual equal, she was fluent in his native language and had a deep understanding of his aesthetic sensibility.

Dora Maar became Picasso's mistress—as well as his subject—for the war years, a period of increasing political distress for him. In 1937, he painted *Guernica*. In 1941, the year of **Tête de femme** (charcoal on newsprint), Germany invaded France. Picasso refused to leave as Paris's occupation grew imminent; he turned down offers of asylum from the United States and Mexico. He remained in his studio—completely emptied of its art by the occupying forces.

The charcoal head of Dora Maar rests appropriately on the newsprint of the *Paris-soir* in *Tête de femme*, her flesh composed of print.

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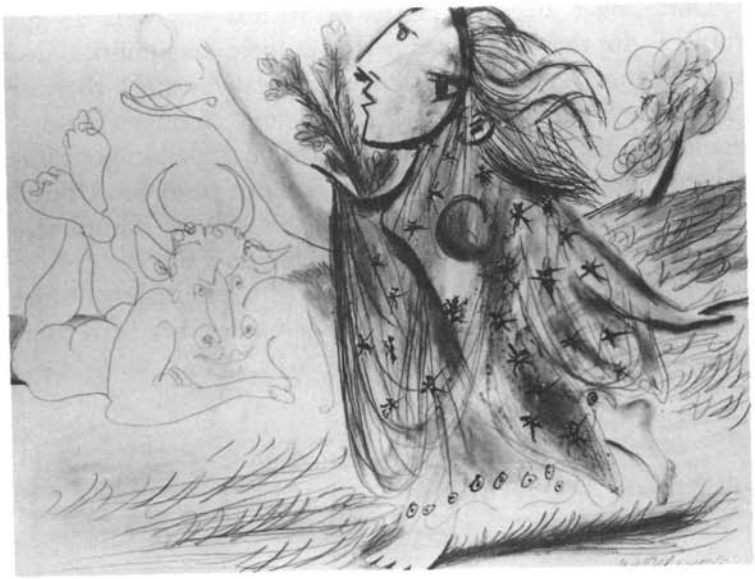

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Picasso recalls Dinard in this drawing of Marie-Thérèse playing ball while he, as the Minotaur, watches. Drawn eight years after their courtship began, this work represents Marie-Thérèse as a divine mirage, wispy and ethereal, her body evaporating into the landscape. A tree rises between her outreaching arm and lunar-like head. For Picasso, Marie-Thérèse was an earth goddess; the artist went so far as to color her gown by rubbing the petals of flowers on the paper.

The minotaur appeared throughout Picasso's art in the mid-1930s; it was clear Picasso lived vicariously in the half-man, half-animal. There was a reason for this embodiment: Picasso was caught in a web of domestic problems that for the first time had caused him to abandon painting in favor of poetry. In the fall of 1933 he had been unsuccessful in halting the publication of Fernande's book *Picasso et ses amis*; it caused great turmoil in his relationship with the tremendously jealous Olga. His marriage was strained to the point of divorce, but French tax laws made divorce impractical. By June 1935, Marie-Thérèse's pregnancy could no longer be kept secret. Picasso escaped these domestic problems by inserting himself in his work as the minotaur. As he later said: "If all the ways I have been along were marked on a map and joined up with a line, it might resemble a minotaur."[5]

One subtheme which is depicted toward the end of this cycle is the blinding of the minotaur. In the myth, Oedipus blinds the minotaur; the young Antigone then leads him by the hand. In **Composition minotaur et femme** (1936, pencil, ink watercolor and crushed dry petals of flowers), the minotaur stares blankly ahead as the girl (Marie-Thérèse) guides him.

5. Dore Ashton, *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 158.

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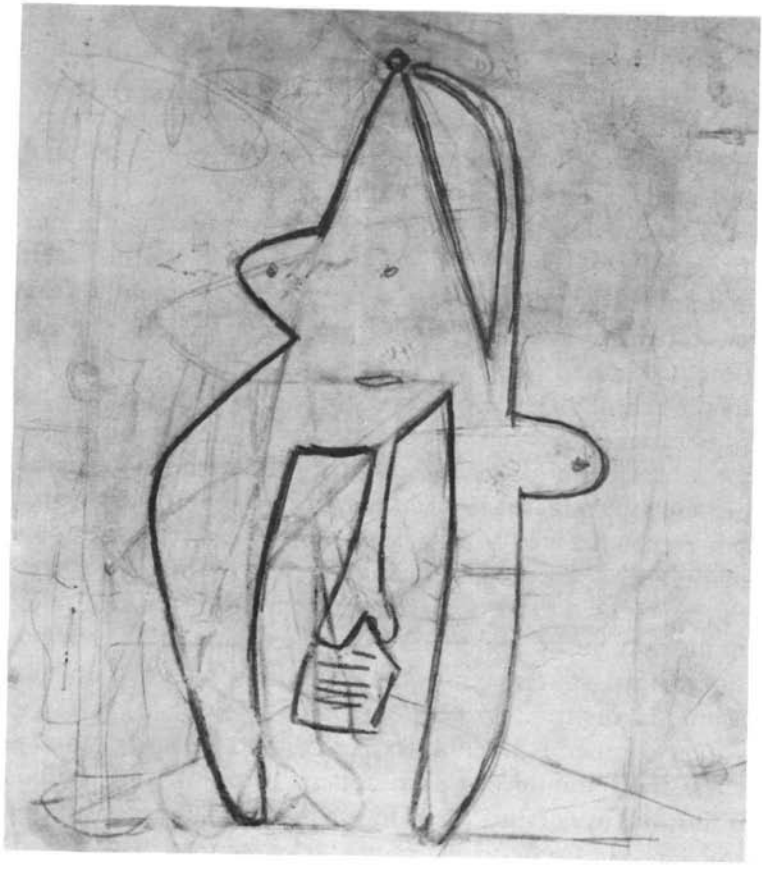

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Picasso's marriage disintegrated by the mid-1920s. Olga's aloof and aristocratic manner—which had attracted the painter to the dancer in the first place—now repulsed him. Her interest in society-evenings had become particularly tedious to Picasso; he especially resented his son Paulo's upbringing, which involved the over-pampered routine of governesses and chauffered cars.

By 1927 Picasso found a counterpoint to his life with Olga among André Breton and the Surrealists. For the Surrealists, the concept of chance was an ideal; Picasso adopted this as his own. On January 8, 1927, he saw a blonde outside a Parisian art gallery and began, "Mademoiselle, you have an interesting face. I would like to do a portrait of you. I am Picasso."[3] Because the woman, Marie-Thérèse Walter, did not recognize his name, he brought her to a nearby bookstore displaying many books on his art. The most passionate love affair of Picasso's life had begun. Marie-Thérèse was only seventeen. A prolonged courtship ensued. Because Picasso was still married, the relationship remained disguised both in Picasso's art and life for years. Even in October 1935, when their child, Maia, was born, the certificate read "father unknown."[4]

Femme Lisant (1928, pencil on paper) was drawn in the summer of 1928 on the beach in Dinard. There Picasso had secretly kept Marie-Thérèse while vacationing with Olga and Paulo. Marie-Thérèse appears in this drawing in purely sculptural terms. At the time he was working on a sculptural solution to a commission from the French government to do an homage to his friend, Apollinaire, who had died nearly ten years earlier of Spanish influenza. In the drawing Marie-Thérèse's body becomes a monstrous sexual morph, breasts jutting defiantly in all directions and flesh bulging in every conceivable way. Her head is reduced to a tiny sphere, her face relocated in the torso with a horizontal slat for a mouth and nipples as eyes. Her arm reaches down for a book that doubles as a distant, abstract cabaña. The arm and hand form a phallus between her legs. The book (or cabaña) is perhaps Picasso's external representation of himself.

3. William Rubin, *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), p. 252.
4. *Ibid*, p. 307.

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In 1916, Jean Cocteau introduced Picasso to Serge Diaghilev. The following year Picasso started designing sets for the Ballet Russes' production of *Parade* which opened later that year in Rome. While collaborating on the ballet with Cocteau, Léonide Massine, Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, and Leon Bakst, Picasso met a ballerina from the troupe named Olga Koklova. He returned with her from Rome for the Paris opening of *Parade* and then followed the company to Madrid and Barcelona. The production continued its tour to South America, but Olga abandoned her role to remain in Spain with Picasso. They were married in July, 1918.

While working on the sets for *Parade*, Picasso immersed himself in the great works of Italy's museums, churches, and palaces. He visited Naples and Pompeii with Stravinsky and Massine, and admired the performances of *Commedia dell'Arte* and the love triangles of Harlequin, Columbine and Pierrot. The first-hand knowledge of classical and Renaissance art Picasso brought back from Italy promoted a dramatic change in his art. Picasso's new-found Neo-classicism reached its height in works like **Tête de femme** (1920, gouache and chinese ink on paper), characterized by a fluid, gentle line, an arcadian subject, and a classically stylized beauty.

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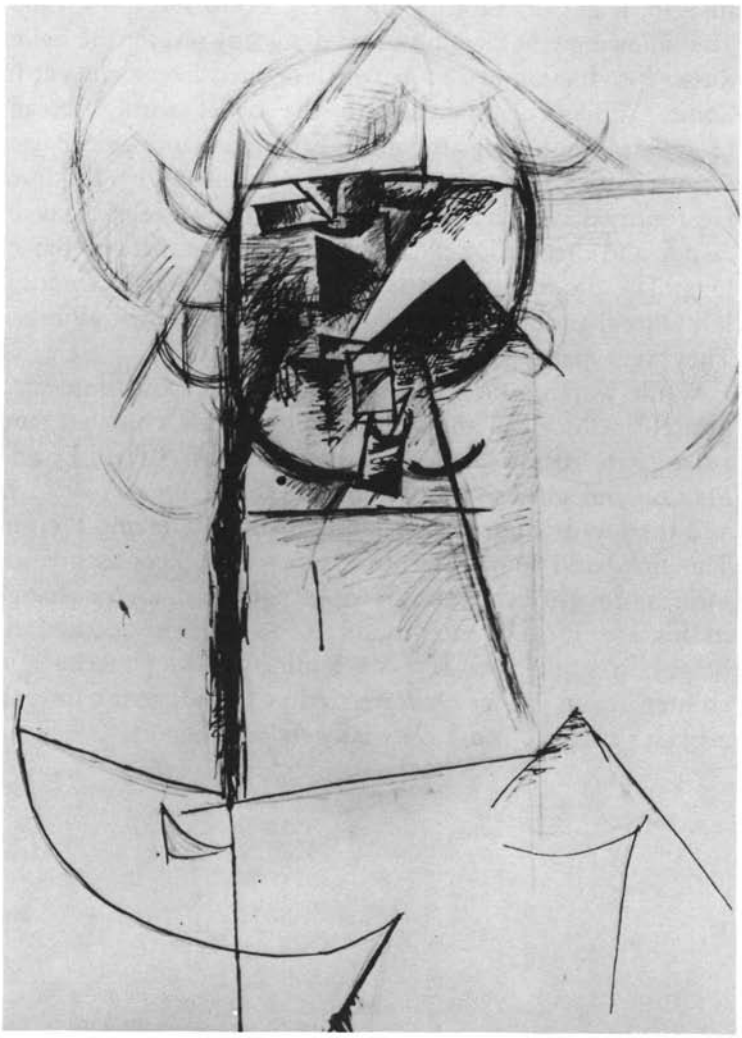

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Mademoiselle Léonie is a character in the book *Saint Matarel*, written by Max Jacob and published in 1911 by Picasso's dealer, Daniel Henry Kahnweiler. The book, the first of three volumes, concerns a Parisian subway worker, Matarel, who, by converting to Catholicism and becoming a monk, attains sainthood. His mistress, Mademoiselle Léonie, undergoes her own transformation—from kitchen girl to exotic dancer in a nightclub.

Picasso and Fernande had moved from the "Bateau-Lavoir" to more comfortable quarters at 11, boulevard de Clichy. The new apartment offered a view of a park and the couple began to accumulate furniture, musical instruments and, among other things, a small Corot painting. "In spite of all this," Fernande wrote in *Picasso et ses amis*, "Picasso was less happy here than he'd been before."[1] Later he would say: "Of all—hunger, misery, the miscomprehension by the public—fame is by far the worst. It is the castigation by God of the artist."[2]

In **Mademoiselle Léonie** (1910, pencil and ink on paper), Picasso has completely embraced the revolutionary Cubist principles of space he had developed with Braque. Picasso nicknamed Braque "Wilbur"—as in the Wright Brothers—and he saw Braque and himself as equally innovative frontiersmen exploring a new, technologically-inspired, perceptual realm. In this drawing, the face no longer asserts an illusionistic three-dimensional form, but suggests a new aesthetic located entirely on the surface of the work. The whole has a peculiarly machine-age quality resembling the ubiquitous industrial mechanisms which would become the subjects of Chaplin's *Modern Times* and the paintings of Léger.

1. Fernande Olivier, *Picasso et ses amis* (Paris: Stock, 1933).
2. David Douglas Duncan, *Picasso's Picassos* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 74.

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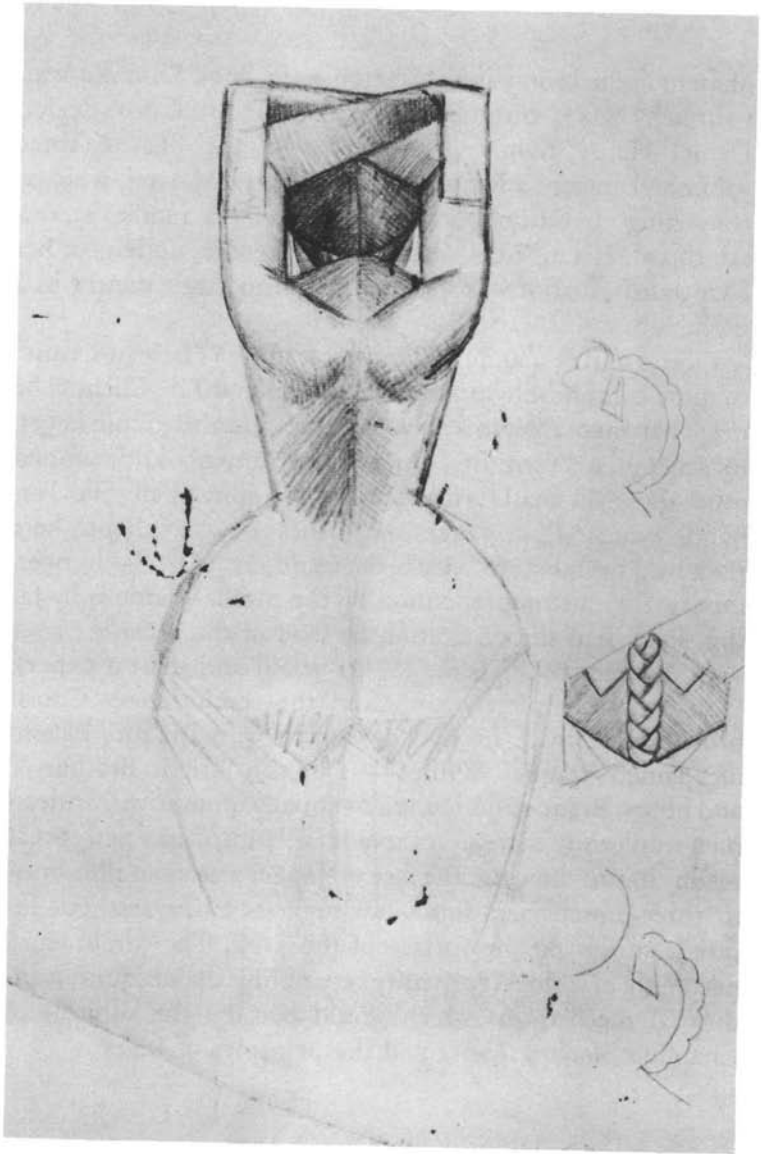

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In **Femme de dos, bras croisés** (1907–8, pencil and india ink on paper), Picasso's classicizing spirit is combined with his new-found interest in Iberian and African sculpture as well as in the paintings of Cézanne. In 1907, Picasso had acquired two Iberian stone heads (which he had not known were stolen from the Louvre by his friend Apollinaire's secretary—the scandal was exposed in 1911 with much journalistic fanfare); then, following the lead of Matisse and Derain, he also purchased his first African sculptures. These influences, along with Picasso's interest in Cézanne's experiments in fragmenting nature, are evident in this work. (Cézanne's death in October of the previous year had been followed by several influential retrospective exhibitions). The roughness of the woman's shirt collar and braid are recorded as though, in the act of drawing, Picasso was undressing the woman with his pen. Although still utilizing classical perspective, Picasso is obviously wrestling with the possibility of abandoning this Renaissance tradition in favor of a new concept of space. In this work he seems to be drawn to the idea of dissecting a moment into successive visual acts—an idea Picasso would explore for the next decade of his life.

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Now living in a decrepit studio at 13, rue Ravignan (given the name "Bateau-Lavoir" or "Laundry Barge" by his friend, Max Jacob), Picasso took up with Fernande Olivier, his companion for the next seven years, and after whom **La Couseuse** (1906, chalk on paper) is clearly modeled. Fernande had been married in 1898 at the age of seventeen but had been deserted by her husband in 1904. By the time Picasso met her later that year, she had changed her name from Percheron (the name of her husband) to Olivier.

The domesticity of Picasso's life with Fernande is clear in *La Couseuse*. The dress suggests a mountainscape out of which Fernande's delicately rendered face rises. Fernande does not model for the artist; rather, Picasso has classicized a small domestic moment into an emblem of womanhood: a symbolic Madonna cradling an imaginary Christ child. Although Picasso rarely worked with strict ecclesiastical themes, throughout his career he elevated everyday life into a religious concept of his own.

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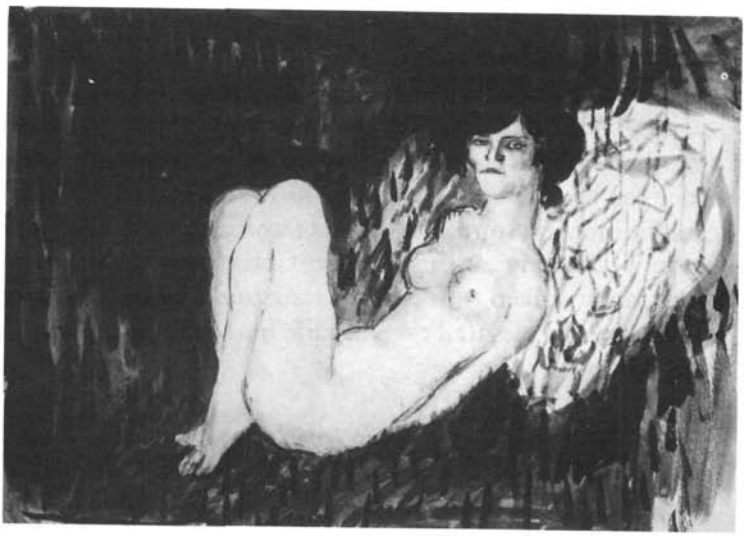

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tooth, leaving what must be a conspicuously ugly black hole in the forefront of one's mouth? Oh, what matter which is worse! thinks Duncan then. All of these things have happened (the most recent being the tooth, which only came to his attention out here in the cold) and he can stand none of them.

The runners that Duncan encounters along his way are grim-faced, red and sweaty, and the young mothers pushing those carriages are scruffy, sloppily dressed; and the babies are, well, babies. Where are the handsome, glamorous pairs of lovers that one used to glimpse in New York, in Central Park? Duncan asks this wistful question of himself, and then he answers (insanely!): On Ocracoke Island. For it is to Ocracoke that Cath has run off with her poet, and in his mind Duncan has just seen the two of them, Cath and Brennan O'Donahue (of all corny, phoney, false-literary names), Brennan as handsome and fair as Cath herself is—he sees Brennan and Cath and scores of other couples, all young and blond, all healthy and beautiful, and running, running like horses, on a wild and endless beach.

Cath's gesture—if you call running off to an island with a poet a gesture—was made even less bearable for Duncan by the publicity it drew; she had to choose a famous poet, a Pulitzer Prize-winning, brawling media hero of a poet. A small item in *Newsweek* (Newsmakers) described O'Donahue as having run off to Ocracoke Island "like a pirate, a professor's wife his plunder." Very poetic for a news magazine, Duncan thought: perhaps Brennan himself had written the item? In any case a lot of people seemed to know whose wife was meant.

At times Duncan feels literally murderous: he will go there to Ocracoke and shoot them both, and then himself. He has found the place on a map, and it looks as though you had to take a ferry from a town called Swansquarter. *Swansquarter?* But surely murder would be a more respectable, even a nobler act than a lot of talk, so deeply embarrassing, so sickly humiliating to recall.

Nearing his hotel, and the promise of some comfort, Duncan begins though to dread the coming night. He is to dine with Emily, his second wife: his briefest marriage, that to

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Emily, and perhaps for that reason they have stayed in touch, have remained almost friends. Emily and Cath have even met, Duncan now recalls, on a trip to New York that he and Cath took, just before their marriage. Emily is a painter, beginning to be quite successful. She is, as they all have been, considerably younger than Duncan.

(Younger and in one way or another very talented, all of them, Duncan reflects. More talented than he? That was surely a problem with Jessica, the first wife, a poet who took a very low view of criticism. Less so with Emily, perhaps because painting is, well, not literary, and they were not together very long. The worst was Janice, herself a professor, a literary critic. Undoubtedly Janice in her way was responsible for Cath, who is talentless, a born appreciator.)

But: unless he exercises the utmost caution, for which he feels himself much too tired, devoid of resources, Duncan fears that he will simply repeat the follies of the day, with Emily, tonight. He will talk again—perhaps even more ridiculously—about Cath; obviously he will do so, since she and Emily have met. Emily by now is probably—is undoubtedly a feminist; she could finish him off entirely.

At the hotel desk Duncan looks longingly toward the cubbyholes of messages. If only there were a pink phone slip from Emily, cancelling, for whatever reason. (Or: a slip saying Cath had called?) But there is nothing, and heavily now Duncan walks over to the elevator. He rings, ascends.

This making a fool of himself began for Duncan at breakfast, in the somewhat dingy diningroom of his hotel, as he talked (or tried to explain) to Jasper Wilkes, a former student, and began to babble: "In point of fact I actually encouraged her to have an affair—or affairs; one can't say I wasn't generous. Ironically enough, she could be said to be doing just what I told her to do. In a sense."

Jasper repeated, "In a sense," with perhaps too much relish. A highly successful advertising executive since abandoning *academe*, Jasper is a prematurely, quite shiningly bald young man, with clever, hooded eyes.

"After all," Duncan continued, long fingers playing with his

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croissant's cold buttery remains, "I'm very busy. And besides." He smiled briefly, sadly, implying much.

"Of course." Jasper's eyes closed, but his voice had an agreeing sound.

Gulping at strong lukewarm coffee—he had just sent back for fresh—Duncan had a nervously exhilarated sense that this was not how men talked to each other, or, not usually. Or perhaps these days they do? They are 'open' with each other, as women have always been? In any case he hoped that he had not got out of his depth, with Jasper. The coffee had made him feel a little drunk.

And at the word 'depth' his mind stopped, totally, and replayed, *depth, depth.* He had suddenly, involuntarily seen Atlantic waves, brilliant and mountainous, quite possibly fatal. He had imagined Ocracoke Island. Again.

But could Jasper be in a hurry? Off somewhere? Duncan was conscious of wanting to prolong (oh! all day) this relieving, if highly unusual conversation. "Precisely," he hastened to agree with what he imagined Jasper just had said. "I intended something discreet and, I suppose I also hoped, something minor. A dalliance more or less along my own lines. My old lines, I suppose I should say." He attempted a modest laugh, but the sound was bleak.

"Right," Jasper agreed. "Something to take up a certain amount of her time and energy. Rather like going to a gym."

"Oh, precisely."

The two men exchanged looks in which there was expressed some shock at their complicitous cynicism, but more pure pleasure—or so Duncan for the moment believed.

The coffee arrived, at which Jasper frowned, conclusively proving to Duncan that he was after all in a hurry; he did not even want more coffee.

"The point is," said Jasper, in a summing-up way, "whether or not you want her back. One. And, two, if you do, how to get her."

Unprepared for this *précis*, Duncan felt quite dizzied.

Nor was he prepared for what came next, which was Jasper's efficient departure: a smooth rise to his feet, and a firm, sin-

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cere handshake. Lots of eye contact. Murmurs of friendship. And then Jasper was gone, last glimpsed as a narrow, animated back departing through the door that led out to the lobby.

Quite disconcerted, and alone with his hot, unconsoling coffee, Duncan looked around. This room had got uglier, he thought, trying to recall what he used to like about it. Surely not the pictures, the big bright oils which all looked like copies of famous works, giving the room a spurious look of 'taste'? Never the pictures, he concluded, and surely not the inferior coffee, and fake croissants. Dismally he reminded himself that he had always chosen this hotel for reasons of economy, never for charm.

Now everything seemed to disturb him, though: the room with its awful art, the bad coffee, and particularly his just-ended conversation with Jasper Wilkes. And why? Rerunning that conversation, he suceeded in finding nothing truly objectionable. (Unless: that crack about going to gyms—would that have been a 'put-on'?) Bright Jasper, though. All agreement, stating and restating Duncan's own views in a clear succinct way. But perhaps that very succinctness was the problem? Especially at the end, just before Jasper hurried off to wherever?

Leaning back into the once-pneumatic banquette, for reassurance Duncan stroked his hair, now white but still gratifyingly thick and fine. How Jasper must envy his hair! That in itself could explain quite a lot.

Duncan thought then of the old days, when Jasper as a student came petitioning with his poetry. In conference with Jasper, Duncan might sneak a quick look at his large grandfather clock, while pretending to allow his gaze to wander. And apprised of the time, he, Duncan, might then too brusquely sum up his view of Jasper's poem, or poems: Jasper had been all too prolific. And, as Jasper at last got up reluctantly to leave, the also departing Duncan, a man in early middle age, might well be off to visit some pert-breasted, ambitious literary girl, for something 'discreet,' and 'minor.'

As though Jasper had encouraged him, seduced him, even, into all that talk about Cath, Duncan felt a pained resentment. Especially he resented Jasper's just getting up and leav-

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ing him like that—all at sea, almost drowned in ungovernable feelings.

But, at lunchtime, Duncan could be said to have done it again.

"It was really the way she left that I so much minded," he remarked to his lunch companion, Marcus Thistlethwaite, an English critic, a very old friend. They were seated in a corner of a pretty new Upper West Side restaurant, banks of fall flowers in the windows, filtered sunshine. "I would have given a maid more notice," Duncan added, and then reflected that his analogy had been slightly confused: just whom did he mean was whose maid, and who gave notice? He hoped that Marcus had not observed this, but naturally no such luck.

"I'm not sure just who was whose maid," said Marcus, with his rachety, cropped-off laugh. "But I believe I rather catch your drift, as it were." And then, "Is this quite the proper thing to do with lobster claws?"

"Oh yes, you just crack them like nuts," instructed Duncan, who had just wondered why on earth he had ordered something he had never much liked, and that was at best quite difficult to eat. (And that reminded him inevitably of the seacoast.)

Marcus's hair is thin and silvery, like tinsel; draped across his bright impressive skull, it ornamented his head. Duncan has always been somewhat in awe of Marcus, of his erudition and his cool, uncluttered, passionless judgements. And so why on earth did he have to make that silly remark about Cath, and the dismissal of maids? "Say what you like about New York," he then attempted, striving for an even tone despite a certain pressure in his chest, "the autumns here are wonderful. You know I walked up through the park from my hotel, and the air—so brisk! And the color of sky, and those flowers."

Marcus just perceptibly inclined his head, acknowledging flowers, and weather. And then he launched into one of the mini-speeches to which he is given. "An interesting fact, and one that I've made note of—"(to those who know Marcus, a familiar beginning, very likely boding no good to his audience, be it plural or singular)—"and of which you, my dear

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Duncan, have just furnished further proof, in any case so interesting, is the human tendency in times of distress at some ill-treatment by a fellow human to complain of the method of treatment, the form it took, rather than the actuality. The cruel event itself is not mentioned, even. A man who is fired from his job invariably sounds as though a little more tact would have made it perfectly acceptable. And a fellow whose mistress has taken off—well, I'm sure you quite see what I mean."

"In my own case I do think even some slight warning might have been in order," Duncan bravely if weakly managed to say. "And she was not my mistress—my *wife*. We'd been married for almost three years."

"My dear fellow, naturally I was speaking in a general way, and you know how I tend to run on. Well, I don't think I much care for these lobsters of yours. What's our next course? I seem already to have forgotten."

What an old bore Marcus has become, so opinionated, so—so insensitive, thought Duncan, once they parted and he began his walk. However, irritation soon gave way to the sound of darker voices, which asked if he himself was not almost as old, and as boring. And perhaps Marcus was less insensitive than he, Duncan was hyper-sensitive, an open wound.

At which point he made—or rather, his probing tongue made the most unwelcome discovery about his missing tooth.

Back at last in his hotel room, that cold and perilous park walk done with, behind him, Duncan picks up the phone and almost instantly he succeeds (the day's first small piece of luck) in reaching his dentist. Who is reassuring. Nothing to worry about, the dentist tells Duncan, happens all the time. He adds that it probably does not look as unsightly as Duncan thinks it does; and gives him an appointment for the following week.

The bathroom mirror informs Duncan that his missing tooth, his 'black hole' is unsightly only when he very broadly grins, which he can surely see no reason for doing at any foreseeable time.

Lying at last across his oversized bed, eyes closed, Duncan attempts to generalize about his situation; particulars are what

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finally do you in, he has found—and so he will not think about Cath's pretty shoulders, nor her odd harsh mountain consonants. He strives instead for abstraction, beginning some mental notes on jealousy in an older person, as opposed to what is experienced by the young.

When one is young, he thinks the emotion of jealousy is wracking, torturous, but at the same time very arousing (he has to admit), an almost delicious pain. Whereas when one is older, and jealous, there is only deep, irremovable sadness, deprivation, hopelessness.

(So much for notes.)

Cath: just a pallid, slightly gangling, easily blushing, mild-tempered girl from the land of the Great Smokey Mountains, from whence those consonants, those vowels. But a girl with an amazing ear for poetry, and a passion for it. Cath was (she *is*, oh, surely she still is) literally crazy about the verse of Andrew Marvell, Herrick, Donne. Wallace Stevens (Duncan's own particular enthusiasm) and more recently some women with curious names: Levertov? Pollitt? Clampton? And most recently of all, Mr. Brennan O'Donahue.

Though at first she did not even want to go to his reading. "It's too hot to go anywhere," she complained.

"But you're crazy about O'Donahue," Duncan (oh irony!) reminded her, and he added, "He's just back from Nicaragua, remember? Besides, I do think one of us should go." Duncan sniffed to emphasize the bad summer cold from which he was suffering (and he now remembers that self-pitying, self-justifying sniff with such shame, such regret). "I'm sure the Taylors would come by for you," he added, naming a younger, obsequious colleague, with a silly wife.

Cath sighed. "Oh, I'll go by myself. That way I can come home early. And Bipsy Taylor is such a nerd." Another sigh. "If I can work out what to wear in this weather."

It was an especially hot September, everything limp and drooping, or fallen to the ground. Bleached rose petals on yellow lawns, and out in the woods where Duncan liked to walk the silence was thick and heavy, as though even the birds were prostrate, drugged with heat.

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Cath chose to wear her barest dress that night, which seemed sensible, if slightly inappropriate for a poetry reading. But Duncan felt that it would not do to object: he was making her go there, was he not? And so she went out alone, bare armed and bra-less, in her loose black cotton; her sun-bleached hair loosely falling, her small round shoulders lightly tanned.

You look almost beautiful, is what Duncan thought of saying, and fortunately or not forebore; too often he said things to Cath that he later lived to regret. His suggestion—half joking, actually—that she could have an affair had aroused real rage. An obscene suggestion, she seemed to take it as; clear evidence of lack of love. Whereas he was not even really serious (God knows he was not). And so as she left that night Duncan only said, "I hope it won't be too dull for you, my love."

"Oh no, don't worry. But you take care of your cold, now. I put the bottle of C pills right next to your bed."

She came home very late, explaining at breakfast that there had been a party at the Taylors' who lived out of town. She had not wanted to wake Duncan with a phone call. She had driven O'Donahue back to the Hilton, where he was staying. The reading was good. He was nice. She thought she would go downtown to do some shopping. Would probably not be back before Duncan's afternoon seminar.

And Duncan returned late that afternoon, after the seminar that included a sherry hour, to find her note. Gone off to Ocracoke Island, with Brennan O'Donahue.

The Village restaurant in which Duncan meets Emily for dinner is a comforting surprise, however; a most unfashionable homey old-Bohemian decor, checkered tablecloths and multi-colored candles in fat dark green wine bottles, a look dearly familiar to Duncan, who spent feckless youthful years in this neighborhood. Then he was a handsome young man, very easy with women—with a great deal to say about literature, he thought.

Emily at least at first seems determinedly nice. "It's wonderfully corny, don't you think?" she says, of the restaurant. "But with our luck this look will come back and be madly fashiona-

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ble. Oh dear, do you suppose it has, and we're the last to know?" And she laughs, companionably. "I'm taking you to dinner," she tells him. "We're celebrating a grant I just got."

"You look splendid, my dear, you really do," Duncan tells her gratefully, as they are seated; he has never been taken to dinner by a woman before, and he rather enjoys the sensation. This is feminism? And it is true that Emily in early middle age, or wherever she is, has never looked better. A tall woman, she has put on a little weight, in her case very becoming (but can you say that to a woman?) Short curled gray hair, gray eyes, and very white teeth. She looks strong, and immensely healthy. "You look so—so very *fit*," Duncan says to her. "Do you, er, jog, or something?"

Emily laughs again. "Well, I have, but I didn't like it much. Now I just walk a lot."

"Well, I must say, I'm glad to hear that. I find runners such a grim group, they quite scare me," Duncan confesses.

"Oh, me too, they never smile. But dear Duncan, why are you smiling in that somewhat odd way?"

"I've lost a tooth."

"Well, we all do," Emily tells him. "But you don't have to twist your mouth that way. It's only a gap."

Quite amiably then she talks about her work: painting, teaching, a summer workshop in Provincetown—until Duncan suspects that she is being quite consciously nice to him, that she is purposefully not mentioning Cath—(whom he himself has determined not to talk about).

Well, if that is the case he surely does not mind; nice is perfectly okay with him, Duncan decides, and then he wonders, *Are* women after all really nicer than men are? (He does not voice this question, however, not just then wanting to hear Emily too-strongly agree.)

But Emily does at last bring up the subject of Cath, though gently. "I am sorry about Cath," she says. "That must be rough for you."

"Well yes, it is. But it's nice of you to say so." Which it was.

"I'm sure your literary friends have been enormously comforting though," Emily in a changed tone goes on, her irony

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so heavy that Duncan is quite taken aback until he remembers just how much she disliked his 'literary' friends, especially Jasper Wilkes, who was still a poet when Emily knew him.

Duncan can only be straight-forward with her now. "You're right," he says. "The friends I've talked to have succeeded in making me feel much worse. I had it coming, seems to be the general view."

Emily smiles, her eyes bright. "Oh, you could say that to almost anyone, I think. It's even said to cancer patients. But it really doesn't seem to me that you've been any worse than most men are."

Grasping at even this dubious compliment, Duncan smiles, and then he further complains, "You know, even well-deserved pain *is* painful."

"Of course it is."

Why did he ever leave Emily, who is as intelligent as she is kind—and attractive? But he did not leave Emily, Duncan then recalls; Emily left him, with sensible remarks about not being cut out for marriage, either of them. Which did not stop her from marrying an Indian painter a few years later, and a sculptor soon after that—nor did it stop Duncan from marrying Janice, and then Cath.

In any case, kind or not, right or wrong, Emily is far better to talk to than Jasper or Marcus. Duncan feels safe with Emily—which leads him to yet another confession. "I did one really dumb thing though. At some point I told Cath that she should have an affair. Of course I spoke in jest, but can she have taken me seriously?"

Emily frowns. "Well, jesting or not, that's really worse than dumb. That's cruel. It's what men say to wives they want to get rid of."

"Oh, but I surely didn't mean—" Crestfallen Duncan.

Fortunately just at that moment the food arrives, and it is after some silence between them that Emily asks, "You do know that she'll be back?"

"Oh no, no, of course I don't know that at all." Duncan feels dizzy.

"Well, she will. She's basically very sensible, I think. She'll

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see that Brennan O'Donahue is no one to live with. Running off with poets is just something young women do. Or some of them do."

"Oh? They do?"

"She'll come back, and if you want her to stick around you'd better be very kind. Just remember, a lot of women have been really nice to you. Be understanding. Sensitive. You're good at that."

He is? Entirely flustered, Duncan gulps at wine, hitherto untouched in his swirled dark blue glass. "I find it extremely hard to believe that you're right," he tells Emily, "that she's coming back."

"You just wait." She gives a confident flash of her regular, somewhat large teeth, and then she frowns. "The real problem may be whether or not you really want her back."

"Oh, that's more or less what Jasper said."

Emily's frown becomes a scowl. "*That* expert. Well, probably you shouldn't listen to anyone, really. Just see what happens, and then see what you feel like doing about it. But I'll bet she does come back. And quite soon, I'd imagine."

Once more picking up his key at the hotel desk, as he notes the absence of any phone message, nothing pink, Duncan's tremulous, wavering heart informs him that he has actually feared as much as he has been hoping for a message from Cath. He is so tired, so extraordinarily tired; he has neither the stamina for Cath's return nor for her continued absence. Which is worse? Oh, everything is worse!

In his room, in bed (so depressing, the great size of hotel beds, when you travel alone), feeling weakened rather than tipsy from the moderate amount of wine that he has drunk, nevertheless Duncan's imagination begins to wander quite wildly, and he thinks again of assaulting Ocracoke—oh, the whole bloody island, all those couples, the tall blond lovers, all racing around. As waves crash, as winds hurl sheets of sand, maybe even a hurricane.

Sleepless, disoriented, Duncan feels the sharp anguish of someone very young—of a young man whose beautiful wife has been stolen away. The forsaken merman.

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He feels in fact as though he had been forsaken by everyone—by Jasper and by Marcus, even by Emily, with her great superior health and all her hoards of female wisdom. By Cath especially of course, and by Brennan O'Donahue. By all the people on Ocracoke Island—that most beautiful, isolated and imperilled scrap of ground, the one place to which he can never, ever go—and for which Duncan's whole tormented landlocked soul now longs.

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J. Martin

My Friend, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the Force of My Friendship with Wittgenstein the Young Man and Architect

Why not---!
The black energy of that time.
We shared
a small open
friendship between
the end of 13 to 15 and
10 to 12 (he was not 14;
I was more than 11) between
1902 and 1904
in Vienna.

*

Hardy---Kipling---Wittgenstein.
He was not
artistic or poetic. I saw later
'he was both artistic and poetic.' My
heart saw
the right place; I could not think straight.

*

He wasn't artistic and poetic.
And if I, a starless, steadfast friend
can capture in words
what I have to say about him,
and about his dwelling,
why should I publish poems?

How many parts, presentably, will bring his body onward?

*

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Heidegger and Kafka, popular thinkers,
inspire such accounts.
Conversations With
Kafka by Gustave Janouch. 1953.
Martin Heidegger: An
Illustrated Study, Walter Biemel, in 1973.
As with David Jones and Robert Lowell, his
friends might claim authority.

If I, a gray Viennese,
can capture with words
what I must finally share
about him, my performance will
have been efficient.
I, within the many,
can expect and accept this.

*

Memoirs

These memoirs began as a senseless version.
They require kindness concerning repetition.

*

For one whose work showed great
compression of faith and self,
he was hit-and-miss while talking.
Routinely, one faulted one's hearing.

O, give me a bit longer
with the man and the architect!
For one whose work took
the side of the unexpressed,
he was a canyon of strange expressions.
The boy and architect!

*

We're travellers, that's all, travellers to the nearest star.
Readers, lost and separate readers.

*

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Entangling task:
to explain how time
took so much energy.
For one whose eyes
took the side of the inarticulate, he
never let something go among friends.
The first person
to distinguish the space between
his thinking and the manufacturing
of his time
might be a woman who is American.

He repeatedly stressed that
he would have lived a longer,
more productive existence
if times
had been different and he had had
more chances to meet and talk
with assertive women.
This was simply never possible.

*

He came to the fact that medicines were aimed incorrectly,
and poorly at that, constantly fighting
little pieces of flesh to clean a mid-sized piece.
They were not filled with concern for why
the pods travelled to his torso.
His body quickly was eaten.

*

Why not! When I contracted one little tumor that was
cancer
I thought of Ludwig.
He wrote that there was
a relationship between cancer occurrences in two
people who spent a brief time together.
"Research supports,"
he exhorted and exhorted, repeating the phrase
again and again and again in personal correspondence.

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He counted
the number of letters to me
which contained this clinical thought.

*

Connections as thin as this one have solved
police cases in every city of every state, and
I thought our bodies deserved the time.
Distant, unconnected parts of things slowly motion
together
when the right two people have been fighting.
It wasn't that long before I could feel, as Ludwig had,
in friends around the city,
some of the first connections.

*

Country Sounds

While walking alone, next to a road, the force of my
friendship with Wittgenstein allowed me
to hear some simple country sounds
before the world in the war.

Before a married man enlisted, or was posted,
one of the married partners, remaining loyal,
might enter an extra-marital union.
How could one condemn it?
Reasons, like buckshot, spread with progressions of
distance.
If one had to write about reasons,
one would call them lovely, country sounds.

The partners lived more simply until
the war offered separation.

Then it began again.
The two together and apart, census couples and
war separation, starting
a trend out of private things.

*

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As firmly as patience and loving pursue the teleworld,
black and white programs capture
the small worry and core of confusion in two people
wishing for
unknown things.
The people hear it
in their discussions.

Programs in black and white affect
the past, present,
and the curving trench between. *See It
Now. You Asked For It. Concentration.*

The people hear it.

We still have
unknown friends.

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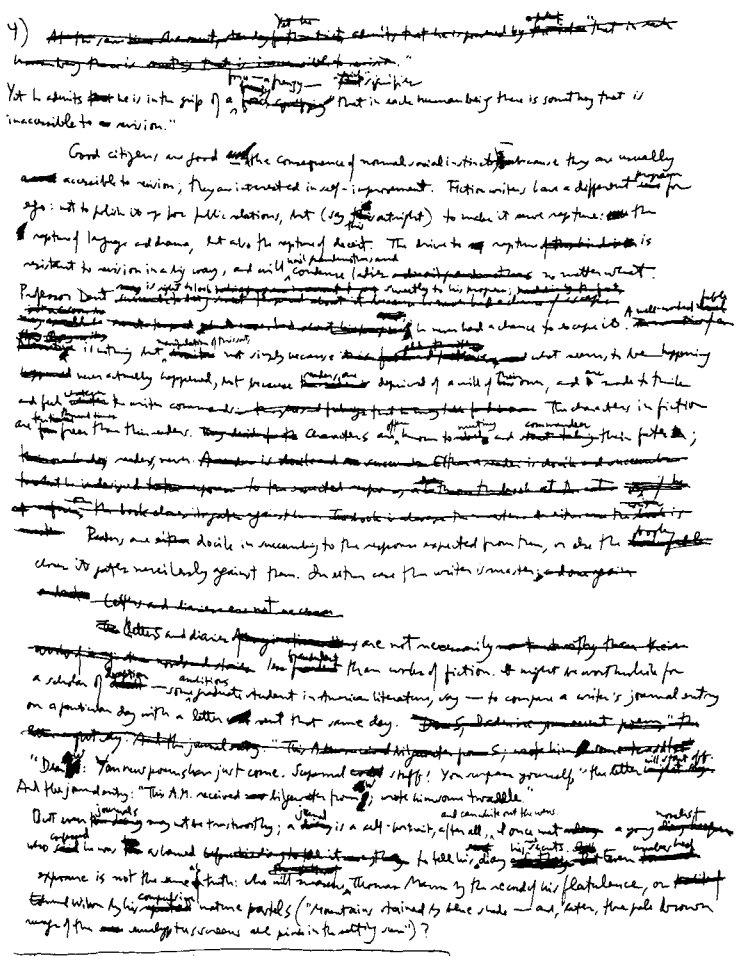

A manuscript page from Cynthia Ozick's essay "Good Novelists, Bad Citizens," published in the New York Times Book Review.

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The Art of Fiction XCV
Cynthia Ozick

Among contemporary authors, Cynthia Ozick is distinguished by her commitment to "belles lettres" and fiction that is about "ideas." Born in Yorkville in 1928 and raised in the Pelham Bay section of the Bronx, Ozick attended P.S. 71, and Hunter College High School. She received her B.A. from New York University, where she was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, and holds a Master's Degree from Ohio State University where her M.A. thesis was "Parable in the Later Novels of Henry James."

Ozick is the author of the recently published The Messiah

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of Stockholm *(Knopf) and two previous novels,* Trust *(1966), and* The Cannibal Galaxy *(1983); three collections of short stories,* The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories *(1971),* Bloodshed and Three Novellas *(1976),* Levitation: Five Fictions *(1982); and a collection of essays,* Art & Ardor *(1983). In 1986, she was named the first recipient of the Rea Award for the short story. The award is to be given annually to a living American writer whose short stories have made a significant contribution to the art form. Her other awards include the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature, three O. Henry First Prizes for the short story, a Guggenheim fellowship, and the Strauss Living Award.*

A few words about the collaborative process that yielded the text that follows: initially, Ozick was concerned that her spoken words would later betray her in print. "Conversation is air," she said, and asked whether I might submit questions to be answered in writing. I made an acceptable counterproposal: I would ask questions, Ozick would type out her answers.

I sent no questions beforehand. Instead, we sat down at the dining room table of her New Rochelle home. I turned on my tape-recorder, she turned on her electric typewriter. I asked a question, she typed out her answer and then read it to me. Ozick is a rapid typist and the exchange flowed quickly. It was a conversation, with the typing giving pause for thought. We drank tea and I munched on cookies. Occasionally we would drift into conversation lost to the typescript but captured on tape. The end product was a manuscript which when amended by her oral comments doubled in length. At a later date, Ozick reviewed and revised her spoken comments. Her changes, true to our intent, were more of a copy-edit than a rewrite. "Whoever thinks the taped voice is 'true to life' is in error" she wrote me later, "It is false to life. But I am satisfied with the interview."

I had feared that the rigorous intellect evidenced in Cynthia Ozick's essays and stories would be matched in person by a severe manner. But what is most disarming about Ozick in person is her gentleness, sensitiveness, and directness which put the visitor at ease. At as great a length as I interviewed Ozick,

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or more, she later interviewed me, with interest, sympathy and encouragement.

INTERVIEWER

You write all night. Have you always done so?

CYNTHIA OZICK

[*Speaking, not yet typing*] Always. I've written in daylight too, but mainly I go through the night.

INTERVIEWER

How does this affect your interaction with the rest of society?

OZICK

It's terrible. Most social life begins in the evening, when I'm just starting. So when I do go out at night, it means I lose a whole day's work.

INTERVIEWER

You don't just start at midnight or whenever you get home?

OZICK

I almost never get home at midnight. I'm always the last to leave a party.

INTERVIEWER

What are your regular working hours?

OZICK

You're talking as if there's some sort of predictable schedule. I don't have working hours. I wake up late. I read the mail, which sometimes is a very complex procedure. Then I eat breakfast with the *Times*. Then I start priming the pump, which is to read. I answer the letters.

INTERVIEWER

You answer every letter you get?

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OZICK

I am compulsive. I take care of everything.

INTERVIEWER

You are also known as a letter writer.

OZICK

No, I don't feel that. I feel that what I'm doing is conscientiously and responsibly replying. Occasionally, though, an urgent spontaneous letter will fly out—love, polemics, passion.

INTERVIEWER

One of the footnotes in your Forster essay mentions a correspondence you had with Lionel Trilling.

OZICK

Lionel Trilling wrote in response to something I had published about Forster a long time ago. It was an astonishing letter. He said that he realized E.M. Forster was homosexual only years after he had completed his book on Forster's work. It wasn't an issue in the society at the time he was writing. The atmosphere didn't lead anyone to think along those lines, and Trilling himself was unaware. I met Leon Edel at the Academy in May and he's doing . . . That thing [the tape-recorder] is going! I just realized that. I thought I was just talking. Hmmm. [*turns on typewriter, starts typing*] Leon Edel is doing a one-volume re-issue of his magnificent biography and he said he's putting in a lot of new matter about James and the issue of his possible homosexuality because when he was writing that part of the biography it was the fifties and one didn't talk about such things.

INTERVIEWER

I take it that you're reading even when you're working on a piece of fiction.

OZICK

I read in order to write. I read out of obsession with writing.

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INTERVIEWER

So, for example, does what you're reading influence what you write?

OZICK

Not precisely. I read in order to find out what I need to know: to illuminate the riddle.

INTERVIEWER

When you were writing *The Cannibal Galaxy*, what were you reading then?

OZICK

For that? Nothing at all. Oh, yes, street maps of Paris. Guide books about Paris. Anything I could find on the Marais, on the rue des Rosiers, for instance: the Jewish quarter.

INTERVIEWER

What are you reading now, for the novella you're working on?

OZICK

Swedish stuff! A book with pictures of the Swedish landscape, a book about the Swedish royal family; a Swedish-English dictionary. But the dictionary is dangerous. Looking up how to say a simple (and immaculate) "Goddamn," I came up (some Swedish friends later wrote me) with a super-four-letter-stinger. The novella will be called, I think, "The Messiah of Stockholm." It takes place in Stockholm. I'd better say no more, or the Muse will wipe it out.

INTERVIEWER

Do you really believe that? Has that happened before?

OZICK

I have lost stories and many starts of novels before. Not always as punishment for "telling," but more often as a result of something having gone cold and dead because of a hiatus.

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Telling, you see, is the same as a hiatus. It means you're not *doing* it.

INTERVIEWER

When you first graduated from college you undertook a long novel.

OZICK

Immediately after graduate school . . . ah, here I should stop to explain that there was a very short period in the early fifties when would-be writers were ASHAMED to go on to get a Ph.D. A very short period! But that was when one tried out teaching for a while after college—as a teaching assistant on a stipend—and then fled homeward to begin the Novel. Mine, typically, was immensely ambitious. I thought of it as a "philosophical" novel, and was going to pit the Liberal-Modernists against the Neo-Thomists. I wrote about 300,000 words of it.

INTERVIEWER

What possessed you to want to write a novel at all?

OZICK

I never conceived of not writing a novel. I believed—oh, God, I "believed," it was an article of Faith!—I was born to write a novel.

INTERVIEWER

You believed that since childhood.

OZICK

Yes, since my first moments of sentience.

INTERVIEWER

Is deciding to be a writer a question of "personality" or of "content," of what the person has to say?

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OZICK

That's an interesting question. I think it's a condition, a given; content comes later. You're born into the condition of being an amphora; whether it's wine or water that fills it afterward belongs to afterward. Lately I think of this given condition as a kind of curse, because there is no way out of it. What a relief it would be to have the freedom of other people! Any inborn condition of this sort is, after all, a kind of slavery. There is no choice. Nor can one choose to stop: although now that I'm no longer young, I talk to writers of my own age about this. About the relief of being allowed to stop. But I know I will never stop until the lip of limitation: that is, disability or the grave. But you ask about the beginning. The beginning was almost physiological in its ecstatic pursuits. I'm embarrassed as I say this—"ecstatic pursuits"!—but I am thinking back to the delectable excitement, the *waiting-to-be-born* excitement, of longing to write. I suppose it is a kind of parallel Eros.

INTERVIEWER

But to return to after graduate school—you took the plunge into a long novel.

OZICK

Yes. I was working on the novel I called, from Blake, *Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love*. I abbreviated it: Mippel, I called it, deriving that from MPPL. And I developed a little self-mocking joke about that. I referred to it as the Mippel on which I sucked for so long. Somewhere in the middle of it, I read of a paperback company that was doing collections of novellas—a sort of "contest." The editor, I seem to recall, was named Oscar De Liso. I thought I would polish off a novella in, say, six weeks, and then return to Mippel. As it turned out, the novella grew longer and longer and took nearly seven years, and became *Trust*. I had already spent about seven years with Mippel. This is a part of my life that pains me desperately to

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recall. Such waste, so many eggs in one basket, such life-error, such foolish concentration, such Goddamned stupid "purity"! In the middle of *Trust*, as it happened, I stopped to write a shorter novel, which I *did* write in six sustained non-stop weeks. It was called *The Conversion of John Andersmall*. I conceived of it as a relief, a kind of virtuoso joke: a comic novel. It was turned down by, among others, the agent Candida Donadio, and by E.L. Doctorow, then an editor at Dial. I believe there is a carbon of it somewhere up in the attic. It was finally lost somewhere in a London publisher's office.

INTERVIEWER

Were you writing full-time then?

OZICK

Yes. Full-time.

INTERVIEWER

And how were you supporting yourself?

OZICK

I had gotten married and my husband, Bernard Hallote, supported me. I used to say that I was on a "Hallote"; some people are on a Guggenheim, I was on a Hallote.

INTERVIEWER

What sustained you without publication during that period?

OZICK

Belief. Not precisely self-belief, because that faltered profoundly again and again. Belief in Art, in Literature: I was a worshipper of Literature. I had a youthful arrogance about my "powers," and at the same time a terrible feeling of humiliation, of total shame and defeat. When I think about that time—and I've spent each decade as it comes regretting the decade before, it seems—I wish I had done what I see the current generation doing: I wish I had scurried around for reviews

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to do, for articles to write. I wish I had written short stories. I wish I had not been sunk in an immense dream of immense achievement. For most of this time, I was living at home in my parents' house, already married. But my outer life was unchanged from childhood. And my inner life was also unchanged. I was fixed, transfixed. It was Literature every breathing moment. I had no "ordinary" life. I despised ordinary life; I had contempt for it. What a *meshugas*!

INTERVIEWER

Can you describe the feeling of first publication?

OZICK

I was thirty-seven years old. I had the baby and the galleys together, and I sat at my desk—the same desk I use now, the same desk I inherited from my brother when I was eight years old—correcting the galleys with my right hand, and rocking the baby carriage with my left. I felt stung when the review in *Time*, which had a big feature on first novels that season, got my age wrong and added a year. I hated being so old; beginning when I thought I'd be so far along. I've had age-sorrow all my life. I had it on publication, but for the next ten years or so the child was so distracting that I hardly noticed what publication "felt" like.

INTERVIEWER

How did you go about getting *Trust* published?

OZICK

Oh! What a story. I mustn't defame the dead. It was a long, hopeless process. I finished it on the day John Kennedy was assassinated, in November, 1963. Publication wasn't until three years later. Those were three hellish years. It began when an agent, Theron Raines, wrote me a letter after a poem of mine had appeared in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*: in those days I was writing poems all the time. The biographical note at the back of the magazine said I was writing a novel, and this interested Raines, who got in touch. He has been my represen-

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tative ever since. At first an option was taken on the novel by the late Hal Scharlatt, who procrastinated over a year, and just let the manuscript sit there. He was busy, he told me, with the big long manuscript of someone called Henry Kissinger. An unknown name. A political writer of some kind. Scharlatt asked for revisions and said he would tell me what they ought to be; but he never called me in to talk about this. Finally, after a year and a half, I appealed to him to see me. He was sitting at his desk in his office at New American Library with a yellow sheet in the typewriter; he was just making his first notes on the famous "revisions." I saw he was making them up on the spot. And he had kept me dangling and suffering, for a year and a half, over nothing at all! The important editorial ideas he had promised me and for which I'd waited so long turned out not to exist. Vapor. The manuscript was finally taken over by his colleague, David Segal, a remarkable editor who became my friend. His wife, Lore Segal, the novelist, is one of my closest friends now. David Segal sent me a hundred pages with red-pencil marks all over them, and asked for cuts. I had known all along that I would never have accepted any cuts from Scharlatt; and I could not bring myself to accept any from David, whom I respected. I had a dilemma: accept the cuts, and be published; refuse, and languish forever unpublished. I declined David Segal's cuts. He, amazing man, went ahead and published the novel anyhow.

INTERVIEWER

You then turned to shorter fiction.

OZICK

I was afraid of ever again falling into hugeness. It had been a time of extended darkness, and I was afraid.

INTERVIEWER

Now, so much time after that, more than twenty years, almost thirty years later, are you still consciously avoiding length? Avoiding, or in fear of, the large novel?

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OZICK

[*starts typing—stops suddenly*] Is it usually part of your interview technique that your subjects end up delivering long confessions? I have a truth-telling syndrome and I wish to God I didn't. . . .

INTERVIEWER

Why?

OZICK

We're strangers and it leaves me utterly unprotected—I don't know what I need protection from, but I can't believe that when you interviewed Isaac Bashevis Singer he told you all about his life-hurts—he didn't. Jerzy Kosinski, whom you also interviewed, is certainly a protected person. Have you ever run into the completely unprotected—or as the psychoanalysts say—undefended?

INTERVIEWER

It's true that Kosinski is very adept at press interaction. But I was conscious of that and. . . .

OZICK

You can never second-guess him. You can never penetrate beyond his penetration of you. It's impossible. He's—he's a genius. Your question was about avoiding the longer forms.

INTERVIEWER

The large novel.

OZICK

[*Resumes typing*] The Modernist Dream. I recently did a review of William Gaddis and talked about his ambition—his coming on the scene when it was already too late to be ambitious in that huge way with a vast modernist novel. But I was ambitious that way too. I no longer believe in Literature, capital-*L*, with the same fervor I used to. I've learned to respect

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living, perhaps. I think I have gotten over my fear of largeness as well, because I have gotten over my awe—my idolatrous awe. Literature is not all there is in the world, I now recognize. It is, I admit, still my All, but it isn't *the* All. And that is a difference I can finally see.

INTERVIEWER

But what about your literary ambitions in terms of subject matter and length?

OZICK

I see it as a simple matter of choosing a subject, or having the subject choose itself, and letting the subject dictate the length. It's not my "ambition" that dictates the size of the enterprise. I am not interested in ego, if that's what this question is about. "The Pagan Rabbi," for instance, a short story written so long ago, touches on a large theme: the aesthetic versus the moral commitment. Profound subject matter can be encompassed in small space—for proof, look at any sonnet by Shakespeare! *Multum in parvo.* I am not avoiding length these days—not consciously. But perhaps there's some truth in the speculation that I may be living my life backwards! Doing the short forms now, having begun with a "Great Work," a long ambitious "modernist" novel of the old swollen kind.

INTERVIEWER

Can one write and avoid ambition?

OZICK

One *must* avoid ambition *in order to* write. Otherwise something else is the goal: some kind of power beyond the power of language. And the power of language, it seems to me, is the only kind of power a writer is entitled to.

INTERVIEWER

But is writing idolatry?

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OZICK

Until quite recently I held a rather conventional view about all this. I thought of the imagination as what its name suggests, as image-making, and I thought of the writer's undertaking as a sovereignty set up in competition with the sovereignty of—well, the Creator of the Universe. I thought of imagination as that which sets up idols, as a rival of monotheism. I've since reconsidered this view. I now see that the idol-making capacity of imagination is its lower form, and that one *cannot* be a monotheist without putting the imagination under the greatest pressure of all. To imagine the unimaginable is the highest use of the imagination. I no longer think of imagination as a thing to be dreaded. Once you come to regard imagination as ineluctably linked with monotheism, you can no longer think of imagination as competing with monotheism. Only a very strong imagination can rise to the idea of a non-corporeal God. The lower imagination, the weaker, falls into the proliferation of images. My hope is some day to be able to figure out a connection between the work of monotheism-imagining and the work of story-imagining. Until now I have thought of these as enemies.

INTERVIEWER

What do you attribute your change of mind to?

OZICK

Somebody gave me this idea. I had a conversation with a good thinker.

INTERVIEWER

Who's that?

OZICK

[*Stops typing*] I don't want to give him the attribution here, because I did once before in print and he was embarrassed by it. So the alternative is to plagiarize. Either embarrass or plagiarize. He's put me in that position.

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INTERVIEWER

But in any case, you're still in the storytelling business.

OZICK

I'm in the storytelling business, but I no longer feel I'm making idols. The insight that the largest, deepest, widest imaginative faculty of all is what you need to be a monotheist teaches me that you simply cannot be a Jew if you repudiate the imagination. This is a major shift for me.

INTERVIEWER

And now you feel better about it. But neither of the two positions. . .

OZICK

. . . will stop me from doing it. Exactly. I can't stop. Right, that's true. I'd better write that down. [*Starts typing again*] In any case, whether I were ultimately to regard storytelling as idol-making or not, whether I might some day discover the living tissue that connects the capacity for imagery with the capacity to drive beyond imagery—whatever my theoretical condition, I would go on writing fiction.

INTERVIEWER

How come?

OZICK

Because I will do it. Whether it is God's work or Satan's work, I will do it.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

OZICK

Willfulness.

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INTERVIEWER

In your critical articles on the Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf biographies, you say "the writer is missing."

OZICK

That's true. It's quite true.

INTERVIEWER

What is "the writer" that is missing?

OZICK

Quentin Bell's biography told the story of his aunt, who happened to be the famous writer Virginia Woolf. But it was a family story really, about a woman with psychotic episodes, her husband's coping with this, her sister's distress. It had, as I said, the smell of a household. It was not about the sentences in Virginia Woolf's books. The Wharton biography, though more a "literary" biography, dealt with status, not with the writer's private heart. What do I mean by "private heart"? It's probably impossible to define, but it's not what the writer does—breakfast, schedule, social outings—but what the writer *is*. The secret contemplative self. An inner recess wherein insights occur. This writer's self is perhaps coextensive with one of the writer's sentences. It seems to me that more can be found about a writer in any single sentence in a work of fiction, say, than in five or ten full-scale biographies. Or interviews!

INTERVIEWER

So which sentence of yours shall we take? Shall I pick one out? (*begins rummaging through books*)

OZICK

[*Stops typing*] Oh my God!

INTERVIEWER

I'm calling you on this one.

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OZICK

Yes, you are. Good God. Okay. Let's see where this takes us.

INTERVIEWER

We can start with the opening sentence of *The Cannibal Galaxy*: "The Principal of the Edmond Fleg Primary School was originally (in a manner of speaking) a Frenchman, Paris-born—but whenever he quoted his long-dead father and mother, he quoted them in Yiddish."

OZICK

There is a piece of autobiography in that sentence. It may need a parenthetical explanation. I was taking a course with Lionel Trilling and wrote a paper for him with an opening sentence that contained a parenthesis. He returned the paper with a wounding reprimand: "Never, never begin an essay with a parenthesis in the first sentence." Ever since then, I've made a point of starting out with a parenthesis in the first sentence. Years later, Trilling was cordial and very kind to me, and I felt redeemed, though it took two decades to earn his approval. But you can see how the sentence you've chosen for this crafty experiment may not be to the purpose—there's too much secret mischief in it.

INTERVIEWER

What else does it reveal?

OZICK

Nothing.

INTERVIEWER

Shall we turn to *Puttermesser?* "Puttermesser, an unmarried lawyer and civil servant of forty-six, felt attacked on all sides."

OZICK

Cadence. Cadence is the fingerprint, isn't it? Suppose *you* were going to write that sentence with that precise content.

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How would it come out? It's short enough for you to give it a try just like that, on the spot.

INTERVIEWER

I might just write "Puttermesser felt attacked on all sides."

OZICK

Yes. That's interesting. It's minimalizing, paring away. You are a Hemingwayesque writer, then?

INTERVIEWER

A Hemingwayesque rewriter. But to get back to my question: is the heart of Ozick, the writer, cadence?

OZICK

It's one element, not the only one. Idea counts too.

INTERVIEWER

But you must have a notion of what a writer is. You have criticized the biographies of Wharton and Woolf as "missing the writer," and you have written about the writer as being genderless and living in the world of "as if" rather than being restrained by her own biographical. . . .

OZICK

Parochial temporary commitments.

INTERVIEWER

So then how would you define this writer? And how would you define the "Ozick" writer that stems from your written work and stands independent of your biographical data and which otherwise might be missing from this interview?

OZICK

But I worry about any Platonic notion of "a writer." I now *must* (perhaps in defiance of my own old record) believe that a writer is simply another citizen with a profession. I don't

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want to cling to any pretensions of the writer as that inspired mystical Byronic shaman or special select ideal holy person. I don't want to live in the world with such mystical figures; I don't like self-appointed gurus, and even less the kind that's divinely appointed. A writer is someone born with a gift. An athlete can run. A painter can paint. A writer has a facility with words. A good writer can also think. Isn't that enough to define a writer by? The rest is idiosyncrasy—what I meant earlier when I spoke of the cadence of any single sentence. And what is idiosyncrasy except minute individual difference? In the human species, individual differences *are* minute. Think how we all come equipped with all the parts that make up a face, and how every face is different from every other face, even as, simultaneously, every face is equal to every other face.

INTERVIEWER

How does your Jewishness fit in here? Don't we have to speak about that?

OZICK

To be Jewish is to be a member of a civilization—a civilization with a long, long history, a history that is, in one way of viewing it, a procession of ideas. Jewish history is intellectual history. And all this can become the content of a writer's mind; but it isn't equal to a writer's mind. To be a writer is one thing; to be a Jew is another thing. To combine them is a third thing.

INTERVIEWER

In those writers' classes where one is always told, "Write about what you know."

OZICK

Ah! When I've taught those classes, I always say, "Forget about 'Write about what you know.' Write about what you don't know." The point is that the self is limiting. The self—subjectivity—is narrow and bound to be repetitive. We are, after all, a species. When you write about what you don't know,

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this means you begin to think about the world at large. You begin to think beyond the home-thoughts. You enter dream and imagination.

INTERVIEWER

Where is the vanishing point? What do you mean by these limits of subjectivity? The limits of our grey cells?

OZICK

Our gray cells aren't our limitations. It's our will to enter the world: by the world I mean history, including the history of thought, which is the history of human experience. This isn't an intellectual viewpoint. In fact, it asks for the widening of the senses and of all experience.

INTERVIEWER

But how far do you intend to go?

OZICK

As far as I can. As far as is necessary.

INTERVIEWER

In the kingdom of As-If, there are some writers who never leave the house, and some writers who are explorers of the Universe.

OZICK

And some who do both at the same time. Emily Dickinson.

INTERVIEWER

Philip Roth stays close to home, Doris Lessing goes out. In terms of content, some are homebodies, some are astronauts, some are chameleons. Which are you?

OZICK

None of the above. An archaeologist, maybe. I stay home, but I'm not a homebody. I go out, but only to dig down. I don't try to take on the coloration of the environment; I'm not

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an assimilationist. I say "archaeologist," because I like to think about civilizations. They are illuminated in comparison. Stories are splinters of larger ideas about culture. I'm aware that there are writers who deny idea completely, who begin from what-happens, from pure experience. But for me ideas are emotions.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever rejected a story, or character, or idea, because you've felt you couldn't "do" it, or didn't know it?

OZICK

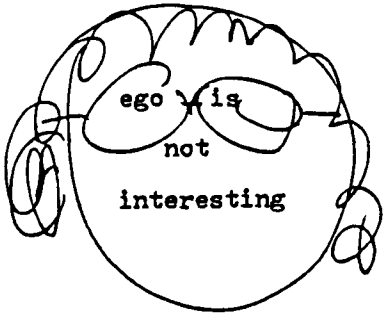
Yes, once. I began a novel meant to trap Freud. I read the Jones biography, read *Civilization and Its Discontents* and some other things, and then quit. I saw it would take a lifetime of study.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a notion of having created a writer "Cynthia Ozick" whose nose might be *Levitation*, eyes *Cannibal Galaxy*, and mouth *Bloodshed*?

OZICK

I once was asked to draw a self-portrait. [*starts drawing*] It came out something like this:



What is the true import of this metaphorical question?

INTERVIEWER

Again, I'm trying to get you to define the writer "Ozick."

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OZICK

I honest-to-God don't know. Can one say what one *is*? How does one define one's own sense of being alive? I think it is this hum, or buzz, blablablablabla, that keeps on talking inside one's head. A stream of babble. The inner voice that never, never, never shuts up. Never. What is it saying? One can't listen; if one listened, it would be, I think, the moment just before death.

INTERVIEWER

Again this points out how difficult it is for any biographer to seize the inner self of a writer.

OZICK

You've really backed me to the wall—you're saying I was unfair, unreasonable, in criticizing those biographers.

INTERVIEWER

It's not where I started out at—I imagined that if you found something lacking you might yourself have a sense of what belongs there.

OZICK

I've never tried to write a biography and I have no idea if it's doable. But. . . [*starts typing*] I have kept a diary since 1953. Maybe the self-definition of a writer is there, cumulatively, and not on purpose. Maybe the only biography is the writer's diary. And yet that too is partial; mine is a bloodletting, and moans more than feels elation.

INTERVIEWER

On a lighter note . . . I wanted to ask you about the pictures that appear on the back covers of the paperback editions of your works. The pictures on the back . . . three different pictures have been used on the paperbacks. One for *Trust* and *The Pagan Rabbi* and *Levitation*, another for *Bloodshed*, a third for *Art and Ardor* and *The Cannibal Galaxy*.

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OZICK

They get older!

INTERVIEWER

It's not that they get older. It's that—when you buy and read a book, you spend a lot of time looking at that picture of the writer. It's what you have of them.

OZICK

I look at photographs of writers very closely too.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any say in all this: that your pictures are the entire back cover, and did you have any say over which pictures they chose? In the picture on the back of *Art and Ardor* you look like you're scowling.

OZICK

Using photographs was the publisher's idea. But I like the photographer and I like where I was standing and I like the bleak day. Bleak days are introspective, evocative. They smell of childhood reading.

INTERVIEWER

What is it you like about the place? Why do you feel it represents you?

OZICK

Well, it's up the shore a way from Pelham Bay Park where I grew up. I felt at home, inside my own landscape, on my own ground. My sense of that photo is a kind of pensiveness. Anxiety at worst but not a scowl. I hope not a scowl! Especially since after a certain number of years our faces become our biographies. We get to be responsible for our faces. I do the same—draw conclusions about writers from their photos. But when I see you doing that with my photograph I think: it's only a snapshot, it's not a soul. If it *were* soul, you would read tremble rather than scowl. Or so I imagine.

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INTERVIEWER

You have dedicated many of your books to your editors. What part have they played in your life?

OZICK

Norman Podhoretz was the first cause of my getting invited to Jerusalem for the first time. That is a large thing to owe someone. He published my short story "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," and that led to a conference in Israel, for which I composed an essay called "Toward a New Yiddish." Gordon Lish was fiction editor at *Esquire* and wrote me out of the blue asking for a story. I took "An Education" out of a drawer and sent it to him along with the letter of rejection I thought he would write back to me. To my amazement, he published that story—which was the first thing I wrote after *Trust*, "in the manner of" Frank O'Connor, and even borrowing one of O'Connor's names for his heroines: Una. My editor at Knopf for many years has been Robert Gottlieb. The day he telephoned me—just after the tragic early death of David Segal—to tell me he would keep me on at Knopf, and publish *The Pagan Rabbi and Other Stories*, which had been accepted by David Segal, was also the day his little daughter was born; he telephoned from the hospital. About once every half-decade I go to see him for two or more hours. I live on what happens in those two hours all the rest of the time. Editors are parental figures, even when they are much younger than oneself; or else they are a kind of Muse. Frances Kiernan at the *New Yorker* is another one of my distant Muses.

INTERVIEWER

In "Envy" you portray a character who many see as I.B. Singer. In "Usurpation" some see Shmuel Agnon and Bernard Malamud. Kosinski is seen in "A Mercenary." Why do you do that?

OZICK

Infatuation perhaps. But I don't do it anymore, and never will again. Even when one invents, invents absolutely, one is

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blamed for stealing real people. You remind me of something I haven't thought of for a long, long time. One of my first short stories, written for a creative writing class in college, was about plagiarism. Apparently the idea of "usurpation" has intrigued me for most of my life. When I was a small child I remember upsetting my father; I had recently learned, from a fairy tale, the word "impostor" and I made him prove he wasn't an impostor by demanding that he open the pharmacy safe, which had a combination lock. Since only my real father, the pharmacist, knew the combination, his opening it would prove he was my father. I felt both theatrical and anxious at the same time; both real and unreal. I envied orphans; they were romantic. One of my favorite childhood books was called *Nobody's Boy*, and there was a companion volume called *Nobody's Girl*. These were, I believe, translated from the French; who reads them now? I don't know the origin of these fascinations; fairy tales, perhaps, and their extreme sadnesses. Princesses and princes trapped in the bodies of beasts, human souls looking for release.

INTERVIEWER

What about the chutzpah involved?

OZICK

Chutzpah? I never thought of that. I think of the imagination as a place of utter freedom. There one can do whatever one wants.

INTERVIEWER

Aren't you tossing stones at literary houses of glass, bringing these writers to the mat. . . .?

OZICK

No. Such a thought never occurred to me. On the contrary, it was their great fame I was playing with—an act of homage, in fact.

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INTERVIEWER

Did "Envy" create an uproar?

OZICK

There was a vast brouhaha over this story. A meeting was called by the Yiddish writers, I learned later. The question was whether or not to condemn me publicly. Privately, they all furiously condemned me. Simon Weber, editor of the *Forward*, wrote an article—he's since apologized—in which he compared me to the "commissars of Warsaw and Moscow," anti-Semites of the first order. I was astonished and unbelievably hurt. I wrote a letter exclaiming that I felt my mother and father had broken my skull. What I had intended was a great lamentation for the murder of Yiddish, the mother-tongue of a thousand years, by the Nazis. Instead, here were all these writers angry at me.

INTERVIEWER

More recently, my far-flung sources informed me, you gave a reading at the Yale Medical School.

OZICK

Oh God. What sources?

INTERVIEWER

I never reveal sources. But I understand you read "The Sewing Harems" there and they didn't get it.

OZICK

No, but out of that, out of their not "getting it," out of this resistance to parable and metaphor, came an essay called "Metaphor and Memory," which I delivered at Harvard recently as the Phi Beta Kappa oration. The incident with the Yale doctors—it was hard on me—inspired whole discoveries about the nature and meaning of metaphor. I owe all this to the Yale doctors' impatience with me. They wanted plain language. Is that what you heard?

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INTERVIEWER

I heard you read; they didn't get it. And then you told them that they didn't get it.

OZICK

Yes. I made a mistake. It was I who was obtuse. I was taken by surprise. I was embarrassed at Yale—but also considerably educated. It is possible to profit from being misunderstood.

INTERVIEWER

What about being misunderstood in general? What about audience?

OZICK

I don't want to be the Platonic cow in the forest—if you remember the opening of E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*. Or the tree that may or may not fall, depending on if there are any human ears around to hear its thud. Like any writer, I want to be read. I know I can't be "popular," and I regard this as a major failing. There *are* writers who are artists of language—everyone knows who they are!—who can also be read by large numbers of readers, who are accessible. In our own time, Nabokov and Updike, intricate embroiderers.

INTERVIEWER

Major failing?

OZICK

Yes. There is the first consummation, and then there is the second consummation. One can't live without the first; luckily one can live without the second. The first is getting into print. The second is getting read. I have been writing for years and years, without ever being read.

INTERVIEWER

Do you really believe that?

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OZICK

It's not a matter of belief. It's a matter of knowing.

INTERVIEWER

Of knowing that very few people who read you are getting it?

OZICK

[*Stops typing*] Very few people read me.

INTERVIEWER

Very few people read you? You're in paperback.

OZICK

That's a small miracle. I have no idea whether any of those paperbacks are finding readers. I'm sure not. I'm sure *Trust* isn't. Those paperbacks represent an act of philanthropy on the part of one person, Bill Whitehead, who originated Obelisk. A publisher willing to lose money.

INTERVIEWER

Really? I don't think that Obelisk or anyone is in the business of publishing to lose money. There are people being read less than you, as well.

OZICK

Given the literary situation in our country, there are always people being read less. Not only young newcomers. I know an established writer with three unpublished novels going the rounds. Finding people who are read less is no trick. Finding out that one is read at all *is* a trick. For a long time I didn't feel I could honorably call myself a writer because I didn't have any of the accoutrements. Readers, mainly.

INTERVIEWER

When did you start feeling you could say you were a writer?

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OZICK

Pretty recently.

INTERVIEWER

Things like the Harold and Mildred Strauss Living Award must help.

OZICK

That certainly was a validation. But I always need validation. A major, marvelous, unbelievable event. I was in Italy when the letter arrived and my husband opened it because he had a sense it was important. I came home from the airport and he put the letter in front of me on the kitchen table and said open it. And I did and I simply wept and wept and said I cannot possibly accept this. Why me? There are so many others with the same track record who could use this just as much as I. And I had such a wallow of guilt. I think it took more than a year before I felt that I could receive it with pure—I should say purified—joy without the guilt of having won a lottery and feeling undeserving and unmerited. That's why I don't see that photo as a scowl, I see it as expressing all these things about someone who feels unsure, unvalidated, un-, un-, un-, any word that begins with *un-*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a certain amount of bitterness about that?

OZICK

No, not at all. That picture must strike you as a bitter scowl. No, I'm not bitter.

INTERVIEWER

I used the word bitter because I thought *The Cannibal Galaxy* had an edge of bitterness to it.

OZICK

I am still hurt by P.S. 71. The effect of childhood hurt con-

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tinues to the grave. I had teachers who hurt me, who made me believe I was stupid and inferior.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. You've written about that. Is your validation your revenge?

OZICK

I've discussed "revenge" with other writers, and discovered I'm not alone in facing the Medusalike truth that one reason writers write—the pressure toward language aside; and language is always the first reason, and most of the time the only reason—one reason writers write is out of revenge. Life hurts; certain ideas and experiences hurt; one wants to clarify, to set out illuminations, to replay the old bad scenes and get the *Treppenworte* said—the words one didn't have the strength or the ripeness to say when those words were necessary for one's dignity or survival.

INTERVIEWER

Have you achieved it?

OZICK

Revenge? On P.S. 71? Who knows? Where now are the snows of yesteryear? Where is Mrs. Florence O'Brien? Where is Mr. Dougherty? Alas, I think not. In the end, there *is* no revenge to be had. "Too late" is the same as not-at-all. And that's a good thing, isn't it? So that in the end one is left with a story instead of with spite. Any story is worth any amount of vindictiveness.

INTERVIEWER

"Too late." Is there really such a thing as too late?

OZICK

I am ashamed to confess this. It's ungrateful and wrong. But I am one—how full of shame I feel as I confess this—who ex-

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pected to achieve—can I dare to get this out of my throat?—something like—impossible to say the words—Literary Fame by the age of twenty-five. By the age of twenty-seven I saw that Holy and Anointed Youth was over, and even then it was already too late. The decades passed. I'm afraid I think—deeply think—that if it didn't come at the right time, at the burnished crest of youth, then it doesn't matter. And I am not even sure what you or I mean by "it." I will not now know how to say what "it" is. So I have put all that away. It is now completely, completely beside the point. One does what one needs to do; that's all there is. It's wrong, bad, stupid, senseless to think about anything else. I think *only* of what it is I want to write about, and then about the problems in the doing of it. I don't think of anything else at all.

INTERVIEWER

The holocaust figures in many of your stories. Is the holocaust a subject you feel you must confront in your writing?

OZICK

I write about it. I can't not. But I don't think I ought to. I have powerful feelings about this. In our generation, it seems to me, we ought to absorb the documents, the endless, endless data, the endless, endless what-happened. Inevitably it will spiral into forms of history that are myth, legend: other kinds of truth. For instance, I believed in my childhood—I got it straight from my grandmother—that since the Inquisition there has been a *cherem* around Spain: a ban, a Jewish ban that prohibits Jews from entering Spain ever again. Of course this is pure myth; and yet it tells a great truth about the inheritance of the Inquisition in the hearts of Jews. Probably this sort of thing, in new forms, will happen concerning the destruction of European Jews and their civilization. It *is* inevitable, and it's not going to be a historical mistake. But for now? Now we, each one of us, Jew and Gentile, born during or after that time, we, all of us, forever after are witnesses to it. We know it happened: we are the generations that come after. I

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want the documents to be enough; I don't want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can't not do it. It comes, it invades.

INTERVIEWER

I read that you have formed a writer's group. Can you tell me about it?

OZICK

Nothing so official as a "group." Writers who are friends—three novelists, one critic, who meet not very often to talk informally. We meet in a Manhattan restaurant, or sometimes in New Rochelle; one of us lives in the midwest. Lore Segal and Norma Rosen and Helen Weinberg; Helen is the only Ph.D.—the critic.

INTERVIEWER

Are these meetings related in any way to "validation" of oneself as a writer?

OZICK

No! A thousand times no. We talk about our lives. We are very amusing. We are amusing even about our sadnesses. We are amusing about being "smart," and we enjoy one another's minds. We learn from each other in subtle and indirect ways. Nothing is validated except the sense of being fully and beautifully human.

INTERVIEWER

Would this meeting be in existence if you weren't all writers of a certain level of success?

OZICK

We talk about the children. It's no coincidence, though, that we like to be together because we are writers. I believe unashamedly that writers are the most (maybe the only) interesting people.

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INTERVIEWER

You began your literary career by writing poetry. What happened to the poetry in your life?

OZICK

Well, I still do it in a sort of indirect and undercover way: through the infinite bliss of translation. But there the initial work is done! Still, the pleasure of fashioning a new poem in English . . . but I stopped writing my own poetry at around age thirty-six. This fits exactly the dictum—whose? was it T.S. Eliot's?—that all writers write poetry in their youth, but that it's only the real poets who continue writing poetry after the middle thirties. But also, you know, I got discouraged. I sent my manuscript—a book—of poetry to the Yale Younger Poets series year after year, and finally I turned forty, and wasn't eligible any more. So I stopped. But nowadays when I read Amy Clampitt, I think: ah, *she* is myself continued! I hope this admission is not entirely outrageous. It's something I imagine.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted, for the record, to ask you how you've felt about our use of the typewriter.

OZICK

Replying to your questions by typewriter has been an experiment for both of us. It was your idea, and I thought it was wonderful and just right. It has not interfered one iota with spontaneity, because I have been typing extremely fast. It has been a form of speech. The difference is that the sentences are somewhat more coherent than speech allows. At least I can put the punctuation in! At least I can be responsible for the *sound*, in the way I can't be responsible for the looseness and even wildness of talk. Not that this way of talking has been without its wildness! In fact, there may be something excessively open here: a sinister kind of telling-too-much. One thing I've learned. Speech is far more guarded than talking through one's fingers.

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INTERVIEWER

You said earlier that you envy my being thirty and having published articles. What I envy in your personal history is your Hallote fellowship.

OZICK

I was waiting for your comment on my being a woman. Is this it? A wife can support a husband quite as capably as the reverse.

INTERVIEWER

That may well be your reaction to my comment, but what I had in mind is more an envy of the financial freedom to write, of having someone willing to support you.

OZICK

Then let me be a kind of sibyl for you, or Cassandra, and with a not-so-bony finger warn you away from what you most desire. You know the old fairy-tale theme: don't wish for something, or you may get it. And then what? Youth is for running around in the great world, not for sitting in a hollow cell, turning into an unnatural writing-beast. There one sits, reading and writing, month after month, year after year. There one sits, envying other young writers who have achieved a grain more than oneself. Without the rush and brush and crush of the world, one becomes hollowed out. The cavity fills with envy. A wasting disease that takes years and years to recover from. Youth-envy, on the other hand, one can never recover from. Or at least I haven't so far. I suffered from it at seventeen. I suffered from it at five, when on a certain midsummer midafternoon I looked at an infant asleep in its pram and felt a terrible and unforgettable pang.

INTERVIEWER

But isn't there anything to be said about what seems to be a luxury—the ability to write full-time?

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OZICK

Time to write isn't a luxury, that goes without saying. It's what a writer needs to write. But to have it coextensive with one's whole youth isn't absolutely a good thing. It's unnatural to do anything too much. "Nothing in excess," especially when everything else in the case *must* be in excess: the reading-hunger, language-hunger, all the high literary fevers and seizures. That kind of "excess" is what defines a writer. An image of the writer came to me the other day: a beast howling inside a coal-furnace, heaping the coals on itself to increase the fire. The only thing more tormenting than writing is not writing. If I could do it again, I would step out of the furnace now and then. I'd run around and find reviews to write, articles, I'd scurry and scrounge. I'd try to build a little platform from which to send out a voice. I'd do, in short, what I see so many writers of your generation doing: chasing a bit of work here, a bit there, publishing, getting acquainted. What *you* do, in fact. Churning around in the New York magazine world. What *I* did, a child crazed by literature, was to go like an eremite into a cavern and spin; I imagined that I would emerge with a masterpiece. Instead I emerged as an unnatural writing-beast, sooty with coal dust, my fingers burned and my heart burning up. Have you read *Lost Illusions*?

INTERVIEWER

Oh my God, yes!

OZICK

Eve Ottenberg, a young writer in New York who lives the kind of life I've described—an admirable life, I think—put me on to it.

INTERVIEWER

When you talk about the pain of having read Henry James at too early an age—well, that is nothing compared to reading *Lost Illusions* at the right age.

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OZICK

It's understandable. I read *Lost Illusions* only recently. It was so painful it lasted me a whole year, and I never got to the very end. I intend to finish it. But I take it not so much for a warning as for a model and a marvel. Not a model for myself—it's too late for that. What's necessary above all is to publish while young. All those roilings happening at once, the speed, the trajectory! All that activity, all that being-in-the-world, all those plots and devisings, all that early variation, a spoon in every pot! Interchange, intercourse, inter- inter-. You know. If only someone had given me *Lost Illusions* in my cradle! Would I have been saved? There I was, at twenty-five, reading eighteen hours a day, novels, philosophy, criticism, poetry, Jewish history, Gibbon. . . I read and read and it made me into some kind of monster. I'm still that monster.

INTERVIEWER

But you got some work done then. . .

OZICK

Nothing came of it. Great tracts of words without consummation. All the years I gave to *Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love*, and nothing left of it but the title, and the title all Blake. Remorse and vacuum.

INTERVIEWER

You don't think your writing is richer for that, and for what you learned from your reading?

OZICK

So what? I still have plenty of gaps in my reading. I'm not Faust, and never was.

INTERVIEWER

But isn't your writing—aren't the ideas in your writing—richer?

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OZICK

How can I tell? Living in one's own time is an obligation, isn't it? The isolation and profound apartness of my twenties and early thirties probably crazed me for life. And yet even as I declare my remorse, I'm not certain I believe what I say. Even as I tell you how I would do it otherwise if I had it to do over, I'm feeling the flanks of these words all up and down to see if I detect the lump of a lie in them. I was too fixed, too single-minded, too much drawn by some strange huge Illumination, too saturated in some arcane passion of Ideal Purity . . . Am I normal now? I don't feel so. But I am absolutely on the side of normality. I believe in citizenship.

—Tom Teicholz

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William Matthews

April in the Berkshires

Dogs skulk, clouds moil and froth, humans
begin to cook—butter, a blue waver of flame,
chopped onions. A styptic rain stings grit and soot

from the noon air. Here and there, like the mess
after a party, pink smudgily tinges the bushes,
but they'll be long weeks of mud and sweaters

before a finch dips and percolates through
the backyard air like the talk of old friends.
It feels like the very middle, the exact

fulcrum of our lives. Our places wait for us
in the yard, like shadows furled in bud.
On the chill wands of the forsythia pale

yellow tatters wave. How long has Mr. Forsyth
been dead? Onto the lawn we go.
Lights, camera, action: the story of our lives.

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Three Poems by Molly Peacock

Reunion

Sweat lingering in broadcloth over soap,
the first man's smell I smelled belonged to you.
Couldn't look at myself. I trust you saw my taupe
skin on the clammy bedsheets clearer than I did.
The offseason blue snowlight in that broken
down summer motel all college kids froze in
I saw clearer than my own skin. To look in
the mirror you were was the best I could do, woozy
with fear to see what I was. Your chest—I looked there—
your mole-y back and neck, scaley kneecaps,
nervous groin. As worried about my hair
as what I'd do in bed, I stuck a showercap
on my head the first time we made love
ever in our lives.

How did we stop ourselves
from talking about this? What blasphemy of
our youth we made when we talked of adult selves'
divorces, psychotherapies, and awards—
nineteen years of experienced life behind. Hoards
of things happened to us that don't make any
difference! My dear, I knew you were dying
when you called, and by waiting for you never to tell me
I helped you engage in a form of lying
that stopped the only gift I could give you,
my half of us then, of what we know was true
but must say to be free in it: I remember you.

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My God, Why are You Crying?

When someone cries after making love spills
a pail of tears inside, it is the ache
of years, all the early years' emptiness
hollowed into a pail-like form which fills
with feeling now felt aloud, that resounds.

Why would an orgasm make someone weep?
Why, for being loved now when one had not been.
The anger tendered into tears astounds
the lover with fear to have struck so deep.

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How I Had to Act

One day I went and bought a fake fur coat
from two old ladies in a discount shop
no young woman should have walked into: taupe

fluff with leopard spots for four hundred bucks
which I charged—no cash till my paycheck—
admired by the two old saleslady crooks.

Five minutes later I was at my shrink's
casually shoving the bag by a chair,
one arm flopping out synthetically. Trinkets,

all belonging to my crooked grandmother,
floated across the wall already filled with the shrink's
trinkets. Afterwards, among the minks

on the street, I caught sight of my grandmother
in a shopwindow. The wind was howling.
I wore the fake coat with a babushka. Another

possibility was: that was *me*. I didn't
have four hundred dollars and felt humiliated
by what I had acted out and berated

myself for buying a blazer in the size
of my sister the week before! You MESS!
I called myself a lot of names. Eyes

on the bus looked up when I barrelled on
in the coat I couldn't return to the store.
I refused to go shopping alone anymore.

My rich friend said, "A fun fur . . . how daring."
How daring to become my clever, lying
grandmother and before that my sister whose loved,

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dirty stuffed leopard Gram craftily destroyed.
I had promised myself a real fur coat
which I wanted as I did a real self, employed

with real feelings. Instead I bought a fake
which I couldn't afford. "What a mistake!"
I chortled to my shrink, who agreed

though I did not want her to. How terrible,
I wanted her to say, How terrible
you have to act this way.

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Two Poems by Baron Wormser

Embracing a Cloud: Rural Commune, 1971

Who'd known about soybean stew or what
A camshaft did or how asparagus grew?
Even the much-mowed grass was new to those
Who'd wandered once where easy-listening remotely
Shilled the subconscious, floors were buffed daily,
And clerks grimaced their way to coffee breaks.
The precise anonymity of affluence seemed,
If not deadly, then less-than-alive.
A new age was wanted—being an old age most
Were glad to see go by—yet a new age now.
If it had been, as the grandfolks recalled, too cruel,
Yet that had been its beauty too.
If such a life were now not necessity
But something freely fashioned, perhaps
Such freedom could stanch aggrievement and seed
The ultimate back-to-the-land conspiracy.
Off they went—emboldened, generous, and unversed.

Who'd guessed how various this earth is?
Not merely as amusement—the sweet stuff of spring
And all—but as a literal nourishment; tutelage
To slay the irony of self-awareness, once and
For all; incitement to long reflection;
And defiant essence of unlaunderable grime.
You could get lost for days in such environs:
The falling, unfallen barn; the apple trees
Given over to the deer decades ago;
The animals that insisted on their right
To graciously live and mysteriously die.
Even the sky spoke an enumerative tongue,

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No longer a backdrop but an active lesson.
Embracing a cloud, they lived among actual signs—
Sun dogs, mares' tails, the last accurate fancies
And the first.

How long does any season last?
Longer than you'd think yet not long enough.
They held hands and bodies, made babies, tried
To subscribe to the current Democrat hopes:
Uncertain Gene McCarthy, the remaining Kennedy,
Plain McGovern. All the television talk
Seemed remote: they were Americans who worked.
Détente did not augur a new era
For this unmapped sideshow taking place
On a dirt road off another dirt road.
Like nations, each of them moved in
A disparate, self-absorbed motion.
Together, they watched their youth skitter
And pop like a drop on a hot stove.
One grey morning a car, water pump,
Typewriter, chain saw, and adult's leg all broke.
As someone observed at the table that night,
Leaving was inaccurate as staying.

Where is our mending to be accomplished?
In fact, any place your ass calls home,
As in a pair of jeans patched with a pair
That can't be patched anymore—a careful
Custom left over from the heyday of relevance.
Save what you can—though yours will never be mine,
Anything we share makes for a household.

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Dropping Acid at Aunt Bea and Uncle Harry's 40th Wedding Anniversary Celebration

The little candles which dot the rosette-bedecked
Sheetcake sway so demurely that the happy
Huffing and puffing comes as a cosmic surprise,
An operatic act of gods. What a wind is this breath!
Their eccentric niece, the one who went out West
But flew back for the party, still can see the flames
But tells no one. The flames are Aunt Bea and Uncle
Harry.
They stand slightly wavering in the draught of the years
But lambent nonetheless, pleased to have survived
When others just as notable and kind have died.
When they kiss their errant niece, she is burnt but it
Feels good to be branded by these reconciled lives.
Each plastic glass contains a rolling sea.
Each hors d'oeuvres plate is green and greasy.
Bea's sister, Dora, is crying passionately, staring
From her folding seat into an abyss of joy.
Soon it will be time for dancing.
This means a bald accordianist and
A toupéed, still Sinatra-smitten vocalist.
The niece starts tapping her spoon on a coffee cup.
She knows that the room will dance in that earnest
Way that rooms dance. The building will kick in too
And the street won't want to be left out nor will
The automobiles which have been standing around
For hours patiently waiting—they love locomotion.
Bea and Harry take the first steps and it feels
Like the dance of life: feet beating the floor,
Arms entwined, bulging torsoes bearing rhythm.
Everyone is suffused with music.
The niece forgets her extremities, her rises and falls.
Everything is actual, for once and for all.

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Three Poems by Ron Padgett

A Brief Correspondence Course

When I close a letter
with "Cordially," I
blush with shame.
It sounds insincere.
But when a letter
comes to me
with that same closing,
I glow with warmth.
I smile. I think
this person is cordial,
although until
a few moments ago
I had never heard
of him. In fact he is
a wild palooka in a half-
lit office, his
hair crazed with
enterprise, large
rubber mice in
the corridor.

Sincerely,
Ron Padgett

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Euphues

I dunno about this *Euphues*.
Lyly's language is gorgeous,
of course, occasionally irritating,
too, so you feel satisfied
to have the experience just
behind you. You get up and go outside
and have a hot dog in the sunlight and
think about the conjunctions,
those pinions
that allow our sentences to rotate in mid-course:
"The afternoon was mild, although not yet over,"
placing the dependent clause in direct opposition
to the main clause, like a woman who suddenly
turns to face you and it takes
your breath away—there is a moment
of silence and intensity—the boats
are frozen on the bay and no little doggie barks.
"I've been meaning to say something to you . . ."
she begins. And your heart
sinks: something massive
is about to happen,
you will be joined to this woman
with a tremendous force, something like
gravity, in which
hats float down onto our heads and we smile.

We smile toward this Countess of Pembroke
with her delicate lips and translation
of the Psalms with her brother Sir Philip Sydney,
the great poet and of the great tradition of
fine comportment. His conjunctions
were in perfect order
and he exuded a harmony,
a tone actually heard in the air.

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Smoke

"I'm going out for a pack of cigarettes."

At one point in the history of our language—roughly from the 1920s into the early 1950s is my guess—those words meant simply "Goodbye, forever," as the back screen door slams shut and he disappears across the darkness, never to be seen again, at least in Joplin.

Those were the days when men were men, guys who looked straight into the eyes of the little wife or the crew boss and said, "I'm going out for a pack of cigarettes." They left, and they looked, but they never did find that pack of cigarettes.

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Four Poems by Hugh Seidman

Lake

The hundred shadows of the evergreens.
The refracted
strands of the ripples:
blurring, clearing, braiding to nets.

The thousand gnats.
The broken, yellow
wildflower head in the dirt.
The brown spider at the grass blade.

As a mosquito whines,
as a cardinal whistles: one-two-three,
and the metal-
blue fly drones.

And day fades to mind: a purple
drugged on lush, sweet,
thick late summer.
And the leaves are shimmering.

The mushrooms, ferns,
rocks, roots, twigs.
And the wind fills the body, as when eyes
open from the plasm.

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Poetics

To speak to you, I said: I.
This fact shamed, appalled, excited—
like some beautiful stranger one hunted when one was young,
no matter how, why, or who wanted what.

Goddesses

Some say: ice-cold; others: hot—
though who would kick beauty in the teeth? (O bitter aftertaste!)

Though Athena had a broken nose, I think,
and Venus dined with Mars, and drugged Persephone was raped.

And who will love whoever rose—from sea or hell or head, full-grown?

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The Dew

Drops on the leaf under
the August sun, like the silver
beads from my father's soldering
gun. He taught me to take

the flux, like honey from
the pot, to make hot
solder stick to copper
wire or the stud prongs

I punched through a belt, to spell
my name out—a Brooklyn kid.
He taught what fathers teach,
but not the dew and if

I learned it I do not know.
Though mother had read many
poems, he said, as mothers
do, as mothers do.

But father, mother, even
so, will a son never
learn why he chooses what
you chose, why the words

tell and tell how beads form
to pass each day from the leaf,
and that the sun cools
to the moon's cold solder.

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Lavina Blossom

Mr. Berg Waves to the Sky

He raised his hand above his head.
His hair was a surface of gray,
his hand a semaphore.
No one to answer, to call.
His hand raised, and he wasn't sure.
The symmetry of his body broken,
one arm up, one arm down.
His name was still Berg.
His hand had spoken,
nevertheless, above him.

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Four Poems by Charles Baxter

The Slow Classroom

You could see windstorms and a piece of floating string
making their way to the school
for hours—you could watch the sun,
and the teacher agreed. She had
no ideas either. Everything that happened
took a week in that air, in that frame
of bulletin boards and tiny fluorescent lights,
but when you found a pencil at least
that's what you had, a pencil. They planned the day
for some hours but usually they just said, "Be here."

A plant grew quietly on the windowsill, and everybody
knew it was a good soldier and they nodded hello
if they were standing there and thought it was trying
hard. Where was Hawaii, or any worldly place?
They didn't bring maps. They had a story
about people and what they did, rushing around
in that terrible way they all have
on their business, but no one remembered it.
We were distracted: you could hear

the long arc of water shooting out
of the neighbor's sprinkler and saying, "Why not,"
and you could hear Johnny, my cousin,
who stood at the burnt low end of the playground
stupefied, counting leaves on one sumac after another,
while around him people were busy
making themselves into blurs. And one time they
brought God into the class but all he did
was look at us. And then he wandered away.

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Machines That Make Men Happy

After dinner he worries the switch to the steep-shadowed steps
and trudges down to the workroom

and his wife yanks the string to the attic light
before taking the stairs in her socks

so they can both be near what they put in their hands
with a full floor between them,

the dishes piled in the sink, the food crusting,
the light in the living room pale,

to say, "We are home, but, no, we are not here now.
Please don't leave us a message."

The machines that make men happy are down there,
and the nails in their jars, sung to

by an old rummage-sale radio: variable-speed grinders,
arc welders, radial saws pressed down

with terrible force on forged metals pulled from furnaces
and wood pincered from rivers

to be split—to be worked, bolted, to be bonded.
It is known they have voices

and are heard all evening, the squall of drill bits
throwing up metal and wood dust.

It's my neighbor there, chewing his unlighted cigar,
and sometimes my own work gloves are on,

wood pressed into the clamp, the noise burning and growing
into an intolerably beautiful cry.

When he comes up, he holds his hands out, gouged near
the thumbnail. These are the hands

he lifts to his wife, when she is downstairs and can see him,
a thimble still capping her finger,

and he says, "Bookshelf," or "doorframe." He can say anything.
It's not a gift, this thing, he is giving her.

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The Photographer

But when I concentrate on what
is now in my mind, what
instructions can be found there?

—Saul Kripke,
Wittgenstein on Rules and
Private Language

1.

He knows the tricks for lighting a child: he must aim
the reflector lamps so the face
shades back on both sides, is bright with its
interior grace, its announcement of being; he
aims light at the ceiling, at the floor, to avoid
what amateurs do: to light the child
from the front, like an oncoming car, like
the child's future speeding toward the photographer's
studio with its stinging flash already
out of the case, ready to burst
and wash out the comforting depth
and leave the face a white image on white paper.

2.

He knows French. He says to himself, "Les mystères
de peau," and sometimes, "Les mystères de chair."
The trick to posing newlyweds . . . but everyone
knows how you must incline them
to lean imperceptibly toward the warm flesh
of the other and how their smiles must
learn to be solemn: this is a bow
to the world's gravity, this is skin meeting skin

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and saying, "I promise." He distrusts laughter
in newlyweds; he takes down their faces
and makes a prediction. "Those," he says, pointing
at four hands, two gleaming smiles. "A year and a half."

3.

This began with a woman. This started the summer
he at last lost himself in what he had always
imagined: *light knows nothing*, carries no thought,
is only the touch of a wave off a surface.
He posed her near the window's gardenias
with her hand lifted in what he believed
was a womanly gesture. He stood her nude near
the stairs, nude on the arm of the sofa. After
she left him, he learned to photograph children,
and now at home he says, *See*, as he shows you
a shot of a doorknob, of a dish, of a pencil,
a bowl in the half-dark. Look, he says,

simple objects, the world's wonders, can you believe it?

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The Fables

They had princes in them, and talking ducks,
and there was always a jewel that someone had to kiss
at an angle. The king said, "Yes, here I am,"
and later, after the first bloody war was won,
he said, "We need more laws now. See to it."
The young man and the young woman
who met weeping in the dark snowy field
glanced up to watch an owl hooting at star-
light. They ran away, into the point at
the foot of the page. The fables ended when
the water in the stories flowed out of the rivers
back into the lakes, and stayed there.

And then I am closing my book in the room
I share with my brother, who is gluing a model plane
he will hang from the ceiling, and I look
at my hands, and I think of them as faithful
servants—hands and fingers. My brother
holds up the balsa wood fuselage to me,
and I nod, and there, in the electric light,
the world is not an example of anything. My
mother's voice calls us to dinner, and we both
stand, my brother and I, faithful now
to reality, to the chairs where we sit,
to the fables of what has already happened.

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Two Poems by Tim Dlugos

Dear heart, wish you or I were here or there . . .
No. That's not true.
I wish I knew that you
were happy now, and sure at last
of being loved. I loved
our long talks late at night
when all the others were in bed. We'd fight
about the war and Watergate, and sip
Virginia Gentleman (one was your limit).
Your image doesn't dim; it
resonates through all my life.
So many times I've wanted
to call you up or walk downstairs
to your domain, the basement
with its toolbench and pine-paneled
walls, you in a dark mood slouching
over your ham radio, to coax you
back into the light, make you laugh.
Above my desk I have the photograph
of you kneeling beside me in the garden
that the wood absorbed. I'm two and nervous
in the little plastic pool. You're
having a good time with your Number One Son,
smiling more broadly than I can recall
outside of snapshots, though I can remember all
your other faces: stolid in the pew
at church, sublime intentness of a natural
engineer at your electric saw, or soldering
a new attachment to the jerrybuilt
shortwave, red with fury
over being baited or some imaginary
provocation, but mostly
when someone didn't listen.

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I see your face the times I wasn't there,
as well: weeping to me on the phone
about the total failure of your life
for a good two hours (I couldn't
decide if you were going bonkers or having
a Pascal-like moment of clear light),
or how you looked the night
of your attack, feeling it come
over you as Ted Koppel asked pithy questions
on the little screen, unable to call out
in answer or for help. I've learned
the difference between a silence
and an absence since your quick
departure. There's no "where"
there, wherever you are. When I talk
to you these days, I end up trying
to convince myself that I'm pretending,
and failing to. It makes me think of you
tapping out a signal like a blind man
on your Morse code key, to strangers
who could understand the special
language that you used, projecting it
along a wire from underground
into the air, into the world.

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July

for Darragh Park

"*The foot should never go where the eye has already been.*"
—Capability Brown

I knew the place had capabilities
the moment that I saw it. How the house
stands sideways, for one thing; the front porch view
is of the lowland garden and the swamp,
not Mecox Road. I had them bring a crane
two years ago and excavate a pond.
There's no place you can stand and see the whole
of it, a trick that Brown used when he built
the lake at Stowe. The prospect from the knoll
where the house sits is very much like Stowe
sans folly and tempietto, though the plants
are all indigenous. Along the path
that winds down to the swamp, I've placed the reds:
bayberry in clumps, and trumpet-vines
on higher ground. I planted the tall reeds
myself, in hipboots, clearing out a years-
old jungle which is growing back so fast
I'll have to stock with Chinese grass carp, which
can grow to twenty pounds, a sort of Sumo
minnow that feeds on waterweeds. I hope
they don't eat lilypads. On the steep slope
beyond the pond's a sea of chicory;
it all goes blue next month. I've put some blue
lobelia there, too; off-blue, towards red.
The sequence of their blooming makes the view
change every week all summer. Light. Dark. Light.

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It keeps the eye engaged with every step,
whether you want some inspiration or
a tussy-mussy (it's a word of Vita
Sackville-West's, means "wildflower bouquet."
I spent some hours making one today).
The path you can't see, over by the shed,
is verged by ailanthus; in a year
or three, the branches will have overgrown
to form a shady tunnel. At its end
I'll place another garden, which will block
the sight of houses going up like weeds
from here to Job's Lane Beach. At the high point
of their influence, Brown and Repton moved
whole villages whose jumble interfered
with one long view. *That's* capability.
Behind the ailanthus, in the woods,
I'll put in a spring garden by-and-by,
lady's slipper and jack-in-the-pulpit.
When you're heading down the hill or through
the meadow, there's no way you can tell, but
all the paths are spokes which lead you back
to one place, the lawn with the butternut
as hub, a spreading Tree of Life, as in
the *Roman de la Rose* or Genesis.
I wanted something right there for the eye
to focus on. Then I remembered Fairfield
Porter's painting called "July," with those
white Adirondack chairs. They're perfect there.
See how the white turns pale blue as the night
creeps in, full of mosquitoes and fireflies.
And don't be frightened by the strangled cries
from the swamp; those are peepers bellowing,
not *Psycho III*. The sounds and smells grow dense
this time of evening. The mock-tympanum
lugubriously beaten by the waves
a mile away sounds muffled in its quilt

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of fog. The cooling air is redolent
of linden by the porch; its flowerets
will burst next week. I'll celebrate with friends,
throw a festival. The lurcher comes inside
and dampness clambers uphill from the pond
or blows in from the beachfront. There's a spot
of cloud against the night sky. Dark. Light. Dark.
It blossoms downward, filling up the yard.
Pretty soon your hand before your face
will be the farthest prospect you can see,
delight in. It's familiar by now,
the rote procession into night, and oddly
comforting, like music I recall:
a blues lament that all the things you loved
have disappeared, and you might as well be
anywhere, underlaid by gentle drums
that let you know you're near the ocean.

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Peyton Houston

Ode

1.

Then to go there in the dusky
heavy air of that place yet always
carrying in the shielding
palm of your hand lamp of a flame
establishing the decisive center which is
indeed light. Now you can see
what you had lived and lived by, what they
whom you had known, had lived and
lived by, now glimpse a little
what those who would come after you would
live and live by, and again in them
the visualization of your own passage which
only now you begin to realize wherefrom
and whereto. They, all of them,
are about you now, vaguely visible but not
speaking and what blood can you offer them
except your own that there be
any speaking of this, any moment of
exchange of astonishment that there was
what there was, had been what there had been? You
speak to them: they do not answer and now
it does not matter as you begin to understand
this and the why of this. You carry the lamp's flame
along the dark galleries, up and down
stairways, through silent rooms which
give on to other rooms. The light is very small
but sufficient and casts you in many shadows
about yourself which are never you but which indicate

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that there is a you. Once you had a thread
which you unrolled as you went so that it could
lead you back. Now it is gone: it ran
out. Nor does that matter.

2

But we do not come here as possibly
retrieving the lost particulars of ourselves into
the ancient habit of the remembered
person. That has gone and that also
of ourselves with it which we had so
contrived from it, infused in it, endured
or cherished of it as the days gathered
themselves into years and years into past and
past into what we begin to perceive is a
now enduring if changeable. What, however,
is impossibly so brightly here is the
uncovering of all that has been so hidden
from us, and the man walking in the forest
of himself and perhaps lost or on the cliff-
headlands by impenetrable ocean, is
familiar to us once again, and the one
with him, you, familiar once again: and how
can we indicate to them the way
since come, the landscapes of that interior
specific country which would again
become so apparent? It is this that here
becomes important and does matter, what we
learn to regard with entire eyes to the extent
that we do see, as climbing a hill we little by
little see more and more extensively until
at the top we do see extensively. When
this occurs we
are again aware of that distant, faint
enormous resonance we once thought vibrated
in the world from the world, see distantly

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by day what might be a pillar of cloud, by night
of fire, and think of these that perhaps there
might be guidance.

3.

Correction of the certain thing into
the more uncertain thing and still
there remain the attributes we have
seen or have supposed we have seen or
so covertly have placed there—the thunderbolt
poised ready out of the heavens or the
pomegranate of the ghostly goddess underearth or the
eventual utterance from the dark cauldron where
prophecy is again equivocal from the lips
of a crazed sybil. I go and you go and these
are no longer what can signify
very much to us. Now we are entering
an immense valley filled with the silence
of what cannot be except for the wind's
sounding in the grasses, as a dawn
comes, the stars pale, the light
steadies itself into finally a sun
lifting from its deep well to stand
immediate dazzle before us and already
dreams of our sleep are vanishing—that
house we were in so long, those hands
plucking at us with gaunt and ravaged
fingers of all we did not do but
should have done, all we could have
loved but did not love, what we chose and
chose wrongly, did and did
wrongly. These are now washed from
us by wind and the sun's direct brilliance
on eyelid, and now we can remember that
there was love, too, in that place and
suddenly the joy welling up within us is
unextinguishable.

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4.

If love were there, if love had at all ever
been there, was not everything there?—all we
could imagine or ask for? Not much of it
necessarily—only a cupful or so
from the clear depths of that always
more lucent plenitude, that spring we
so surprisingly encountered in the hollow
of the hidden rock that time when we
so thirsted, when the narrowness was
on us and almost death seemed
the favorable enterprise. Here now I remember
that and remember that there could
be that and always, I think, can
be that, and this tells me a new way, a
new possibility of perceiving, a sprouting
and growth as of a flower flourishing, unfolding
itself as already this water soaks into
parched soil where so long the seeds
have been waiting and ready for this, and this
again tells me as to what does
matter.

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Smoke

Jonathan Penner

Felice lay on the shag carpet, a wet towel across her face. Beneath it, she pressed the telephone to her ear. Her husband answered on the first ring.

"Poor connection," Herb said gloomily. "Why didn't you call last night? You must have been bushed."

"The time difference." She closed her eyes, but immediately became dizzy and had to open them. "You were asleep."

"This is a very poor connection. What's that sound?"

"'Song of India,' darling."

"What?"

"Play it for me."

"I hear a siren," Herb said.

She pulled the towel off her face for a moment, listening. "That's right," she said. The bedspread didn't quite reach the carpet, and under the bed Felice could see crumpled tissues, hairpins, emery boards, puffs of dust caught in the shag. "In this town they never stop."

"Tell me what you've been doing."

"What I've been doing," she said. "What I've been doing?"

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The Fairfield County limousine to LaGuardia picked up passengers at the Holiday Inn, and Felice and Herb Kahn had been there a half-hour early. She sat, guarding her shoulder bag and overnight case, while he went at once to buy her limousine ticket. By nature, both were prompt—more so every year, Felice thought, as though they always expected, with a faith that grew firmer the longer nothing happened, some stupendous event.

She had married Herb in college. He looked, said her roommate—a towering Texas girl who, with shamelessly shining teeth and gums, called him "Hebe" even to his face—as though God had made him to model subcompact cars. A lovely miniature of a man, no taller than Felice, though she was the shortest girl on her corridor. As a "late-growing" child and now a small adult, she had always been frightened by reckless human bulk and height. Herb danced with an economy, an implication of motion, that made more strenuous dancers look silly, sometimes singing the lyrics in a voice surprisingly deep.

He played the flute and mortified her once by doing it outside her dorm—"Song of India," and afterward, to her complete agony, "Habañera"—ignoring the shrieks as dozens of girls threw open their windows. Out of loyalty, she had not retreated from her own window, though she could hear only scattered phrases of his music amid the laughter and calling. She endured it in furious shame—the hardest thing in her life, she still thought—until at last he disjointed his flute, wiped out its bore, returned it carefully to its padded case, and walked away with his tidy stride. When she agreed to marry him, it was because he seemed capable of anything.

She had been wrong about him, though. Herb wasn't capable of much, and had the simple cunning, the slavish patience, not even to try. And she had been wrong about herself, because she was happy with him despite his being content with so little. It was true that even today, prematurely pepper-and-salt, he'd have played his flute outside her window, naked or glued with ostrich feathers, he'd have twirled his hand in

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the fire—a scene Felice sometimes visualized, waiting to fall asleep—to win her or keep her. But apart from her, what he loved (it turned out) was to play handball at the Jewish Community Center and then sit dreaming in the steam room, to bake dill rolls and poppy-seed loaves, to read the biographies of polar explorers. The difference in religion didn't bother her, except that, through what seemed a kind of laziness, he didn't even believe in his own. She had not been able to become pregnant. She was allergic, said her doctor—in layman's terms, allergic, he explained—to Herb's sperm.

Now, finally, they were trying to adopt. Their lawyer often warned her to expect nothing, but just as often maddened her with hints that "something" could "materialize" soon. Materialize! Genes, Felice saw, were merely an idea of a baby. Cell by cell they became flesh. What an idea, said Herb, as they drove past a parochial school, where uniformed children played dodgeball behind a high chain-link fence. What an idea. Where did she get it? Was that Italian? Hugging her sister's clever children, squeezing their hot shoulders at the beach, until they twisted out of her hands to shriek and gallop in plumes of spray, she knew you could really go crazy.

Herb was coming back across the lobby of the Holiday Inn, her limousine ticket in his hand, to where she sat with her luggage. She saw him glance quickly around: Gilbert hadn't arrived. Gilbert was her boss, the kind of man she'd always assumed she'd marry—an energetic Sicilian, attractively ugly, good dresser, with slim hands and feet. Happily married to a three-hundred-pounder. Felice often imagined, so vividly that she found herself holding her breath, a scene in which the wife smothered the mistress in flesh. But far from being violent or bitter, this lady, who came in on Saturdays, was an angel, and also, Gilbert had hinted, knew better how to please him in intimate ways.

Now there was no going back to when, with jokes and looks and scents, a single button left open, they had made each other feel that anything was possible. Now, even flying with him to a travel agents' convention brought the sadness that Felice had lately felt in all experience, the knowledge of its end

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firmly scheduled. Her and Gilbert's hotel room was probably already reserved by the couple who would stay there next. She wished she could comfort Herb, who (she was certain) knew what was going on, with her belief that none of this would matter.

She moved her bag aside to make room for him on the lobby sofa. Herb sat down and folded her fingers around the limousine ticket.

"Thanks," she said. "You don't have to wait."

"No," he agreed. "Look, I'll phone you if anything comes up."

Materializes, she knew he meant. "I'll call you," Felice said. "I'll call tonight."

"Only if you want. I know you'll be bushed."

"I'll call."

She leaned her head toward him, they kissed softly, and she touched his lips with her fingers. "Have a safe trip," he said grimly. Then he left her. As he pushed his way out through the swinging glass door, Gilbert was just coming in, his mouth open in surprise or laughter. Herb held the door for him, and Felice saw the two men reach forward—her lover reach down, her husband up—to shake.

Her voice, close to the receiver, was full of breath, and Herb felt inappropriately stirred. In the background the sirens were continuing. There were other, roaring noises that he couldn't interpret but didn't like. He stood, pacing with the telephone receiver, the length of its cord and back. "I haven't been doing anything," he said. "Working. Have you gambled?"

"Won close to four hundred dollars," Felice said proudly. "The croupier gave me such a thoughtful look."

"How's Gilbert doing?"

"Partying. What time is it? Every afternoon—"

"I hear a loudspeaker." Herb stepped too far, pulling the telephone off the table. It crashed to the floor and he snatched it up in fright.

She was still there. "Listen," he said. "Can you walk? How much did you drink, anyway?"

Felice laughed.

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"Is there a fire or something?"

"Apparently," she said, sounding embarrassed. "I've been asleep."

Herb glanced at the door, touching his hip pocket to make sure his wallet was there. For a moment he felt, in the muscles of his calves, that he could step across the country and save her. He smashed the wall with the heel of his palm and heard plaster rattling down softly between the studs. "What floor is your room on?"

"Don't be mad, please."

"Is Gilbert there with you?"

"Play me something. Play 'Habañera.'"

"Would Gilbert enjoy that?" he asked. "I imagine he's quite fond of opera."

The touch of the man who must be sleeping with his wife stayed on Herb's fingers and palm like an intuition, oddly precious. He managed the steering wheel with his other hand as he left the Holiday Inn (the airport limousine, stretched by some cartoonist, was just pulling in) and drove to his office. Herb owned and operated the Herb Kahn Messenger Service. He'd always considered that pretentious: naming a business after yourself. But other possibilities had seemed still more so. Speedy Messenger? Lightning Messenger? Nakedly hopeful business names depressed him, like anything else obviously meant to seduce.

But this Gilbert was no seducer, not seriously—he was too witty for that, too busy. He had five kids. Felice had worked for him for years, and whatever it was was just starting. This was the first time they'd traveled together. Herb discounted the man's height and charm—to be short was also a height, and charm was available all styles. Herb himself, as a total package, was probably okay. No, he was afraid it was ethnic. And not just sweet peppers, or a crucifix dangling from the rear-view mirror, not anything specific at all—only that when you were with your own kind, a lot was understood. Lately Felice had said she went to work partly to relax, an idea inconceivable to Herb.

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His own work was unremittingly tense. He specialized in deliveries for law firms, serving processes on witnesses and defendants. He carried, besides court orders, a badge, and people were not happy to see him. Sometimes they threw the wadded papers back in his face, and he had to explain patiently that this was without legal effect. Today, while he worked all over town, the sensation of Gilbert's handshake stayed with him as though he himself had been served with a process there was no escaping.

He felt that grip even at home, as he heated his dinner that evening. When the phone rang, he lifted the receiver with his left hand. The clock read nearly seven. Almost four, in the hotel where Felice and Gilbert must just have ascended, in an elevator humid with conventioneers, to their room. Herb saw her with shoes kicked off, curled on a bed with the telephone, while Gilbert poured gin into plastic cups.

This mental picture was so clear—two beds, one bearing open suitcases; a dressing table and bolted-down TV; a wall that was mostly mirror, another of floor-to-ceiling drapes, pulled back halfway to show the iron railing of a cement balcony—that he was startled when the voice was not his wife's. "Ecstatic for you both," their lawyer was saying, "that something's finally materialized."

"That's thrilling," Herb said. "Felice will just go out of her mind." But what he felt was abstract. He seemed to see it rather than feel it, like a kiss on a plaster cast. Eight pounds, the lawyer said. Herb held out the hand that Gilbert had shaken, palm up, fingers spread.

"You can bring her home tomorrow, if you're ready."

They were readier, he felt, than was intelligent or safe. Draped with sheets, the crib and bassinet waited in the spare room. The highchair, the playpen. The changing table, bins stocked with disposable diapers, disposable bottles and rubber nipples. "Felice is out of town," he said. "On business. I'll try to call her."

"I don't want you to miss a minute. I've held her, Herb."

These words, their savor, made Herb see the lawyer's purring lips. His extended hand was still weighing the air. "Sup-

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pose I can't reach Felice," he asked. "Can I pick the baby up myself?"

"I don't see how."

"In a taxi."

"Legally, sure. But I don't want Felice to miss a minute."

"I know how she feels," said Herb. "She'll just float. She'll soar home."

But that evening the phone didn't ring. Herb wondered what time Felice and Gilbert would return to their hotel. He lay on the sofa with his fingers interlaced behind his neck, imagining their empty room, the phone on their bedside table. He was certain that that side of the bed would be Gilbert's, and tried to remember how it was when he and Felice traveled. Finally he got into his pajamas and into bed. At daylight he was still awake, but later, about the time he imagined it must be dawn where Felice was, he slept.

When he awoke, it was mid-afternoon. The mail had come through the front-door slot, but Herb let it lie; he had no room left for anything it might contain. He showered, shaved, and felt both furious and satisfied when he nicked himself badly.

Though it was Saturday, he had work to do. Logging his mileage, for which he was paid, he drove out to the County Home. Getting away from the telephone made him feel better.

"Guardianship?" asked Mrs. Mott, the weekend supervisor. All the staff at the Home knew Herb, and saw him, he felt, as the practitioner of an allied profession. "Who now?"

"Joseph Bolton," Herb read.

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Mott.

"I know," said Herb. "That's why I've got to serve him."

She led him down a narrow hall, picking up two aides along the way. In a small, high-ceilinged, evil-smelling room, she pointed to the only bed. At first glance it seemed to have nothing on it but tangled sheets.

"Mr. Bolton?" Herb asked. The sheets moved slightly. "I have to serve you with a legal document."

No answer. Herb looked at Mrs. Mott, who shook her head.

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"Come out, Mr. Bolton," she said, without hope. Then she gestured to the aides to remove the sheets. "Don't get too close to him," she told Herb.

Suddenly the sheets were gone, billowing away to both sides, collapsing on the floor. There on the mattress, curled and shrunken, lay a naked old man. His bald head seemed huge. "Mr. Bolton?" Herb thrust the papers into his hand and Bolton instantly stuffed them into his mouth. "Destroying a court order," Herb was supposed to say, backing from the room, as Mrs. Mott and the two aides fought to empty their patient's mouth, "is without legal effect," but instead he left in silence and drove home at a speed that he knew was crazy.

Under the wet towel, Herb's voice at her ear, Felice felt that she might fall asleep. She couldn't remember what she'd just been saying. But it must have been about Herb's flute, because now he was saying he couldn't play it anymore, he didn't even know where it was.

"Top of your closet," she said. "With our tennis racquets."

"You'll be home tomorrow night, I'll play it then. The Dance of the Travel Agents."

Felice had a new thought: she might never see him again. She wasn't prepared for that. Beyond death, she believed, a better life was waiting. But she still wanted to watch television with him, and walk through shopping malls together, and bring the various kinds of cheese he liked home from the store.

"Listen," he said, and was silent a moment. Then he said, "Is there smoke in the room? You should get on the floor."

"I am." She beat her free palm against the shag. "Don't you think I know anything? Stay in my room. Fill up the bathtub."

"Sounds like—"

"Wet towels under the door."

"Sounds—"

Now Felice realized why she could hardly hear him. Something like an enormous motorcycle, but deeper, with a slower pulse, had come very close. She snatched off the towel and leaned up on her elbow, peering over the side of the bed. Outside her window a cable was swinging. As she watched, a stout

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man in a Hawaiian shirt, clutching a briefcase with both arms, appeared at the end of the cable, strapped into a kind of legless high chair. He saw her and wiggled his fingers before rising like an angel and swinging out of her sight.

"I might have to hang up soon," she said. "They're evacuating people. I better get over by the window."

"Don't hang up," he seemed to say, but it was hard to catch the words.

"I'll leave the phone here and just crawl over," she said. She felt too tired to move, but she slowly did, coughing. Her hand fell on Gilbert's bedroom slipper. "Can you hear me?" she called. The air was suddenly worse, and something was making the tears spring from her eyes.

She coughed and shouted once again but the words were lost in a pounding roar. Herb listened another minute. He called her name. Then glass shattered, and the roaring was there in the room with him.

When it drew off into the distance, he phoned Felice's sister. Both of them switched on the late news. There, behind a blonde woman nearly kissing a microphone, was the fire—no visible flames, just sensuous quilts of smoke, and two helicopters hovering. The cause was undetermined; many were feared to have died. Felice's sister was sobbing. When Herb told her it would be all right she hung up angrily, as though all this were his fault.

He sat and watched the rest of the news, the commercials, the weather. Then he shut off the TV. On his closet shelf, behind the tennis racquets, was the flute. He was surprised how well his fingers remembered the keys: most of "Song of India," and part of "Habañera." But he found, no matter how he pursed and puffed, that his embouchure was entirely gone, his tone all hoarse hiss, and that was when—having taken the flute apart carefully, swabbed it out, and returned its segments to their plush-lined case—he started to walk through all the rooms of the house.

Favorable winds, said the drawling captain, had put them

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ahead of schedule. Felice got up for a final trip to the bathroom, feeling naked without her pocketbook. Behind her left eye was an ache like a corkscrew. She looked in the mirror—nothing she could do—and washed her face long and hard. At the motion, her clothes exhaled the smell of smoke.

Returning to her seat, she had to squeeze past the teenage standby who had felt so lucky to get Gilbert's seat that he hadn't stopped talking and quizzing her the whole trip. At last he was asleep. But she couldn't help touching him as she stepped across his legs, and he awoke, stretching and yawning in a great display. "We coming in, Felice?"

She had felt closest to death at the airport, standing in lines that didn't move, watching people scream across counters. Nobody knew anything. She supposed Gilbert had changed his tickets, that he must be flying back with the girl from Holland-American Line, as small as Felice but stronger than she looked, who had helped him get Felice to bed before they went on to the party at the Sheraton. But exactly where he was was something she had decided not to think about. For now, her plan was not to look at the teenager's desert boots, which made her think of Gilbert's white feet.

They were coming down out of a brilliant sky. Up here she could still see the last of the sunset, though on the ground it would already be night. Below them lay a prairie of clouds, studded with towers and plumes, each wisp unnaturally distinct in the horizontal sunlight. Felice felt as though her vision had grown superhumanly sharp. This was how God saw into her all the time: for a moment the thought relieved her intensely. Then they were sliding into the cloudbank, single gray puffs flying past before the plane sank into gloom. Please extinguish all smoking materials, the loudspeakers said.

On the dark runway, though her window held only her reflected face, she began looking for Herb when they were still an impossible distance from the terminal. Her heart started to beat hard. Along corridors marked with white and blue lights the plane taxied and turned. With a complicated mechanical sigh it stopped at the passenger lounge, where people stood pressed against the glass. She didn't see her husband.

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Having no bag or coat to reclaim from the overhead compartments, she was one of the first to escape through the accordion-pleated tunnel that had inched up to the plane door. Suddenly, before she felt ready, she was in the brightly-lit lounge. There was talking and shouting; a baby was crying. She looked around, dazzled. Herb wasn't there.

Some of her fellow passengers were being hugged and kissed now. As the rest of them emerged from the plane, people rose on tiptoe, calling out names. An old woman and a young one looked worried, as though their party had failed to arrive. Felice saw them feel blindly and take each other's hands. Against one wall, a man carrying an infant stood patiently waiting.

Soon the crowd began to thin. Felice debated going to a phone, but thought she would give Herb a few minutes more. She lowered herself into a molded plastic seat, where she could see the traffic from the terminal building as it approached her along the concourse. At any moment Herb would appear, running and waving. Felice shivered. She hoped he had thought of bringing her a sweater. The man with the baby sat down nearby, stood and came closer, sat again. The baby was wailing so that she wished she could hold it. The father brought it still closer, sat this time right beside her, his eyes squinting, his mouth contorted, as though he had something remarkable to say.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Alice Adams is the author of eight books of fiction, including the novels *Rich Rewards* (Knopf, 1980) and *Superior Women* (Knopf, 1984), and the short-story collection *Return Trips* (Knopf, 1985). She lives in San Francisco.

Rick Bass works as a petroleum geologist in Mississippi and is the author of a book of essays, entitled *The Deer Pasture* (Texas A&M University Press). This is his first published short story.

Jonathan Penner is the author of *Going Blind* (Simon and Schuster, 1977), *The Intelligent Traveler's Guide to Chiribosco* (Galileo Press, 1983), and a collection of short stories, *Private Parties* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), for which he was awarded the third Drue Heinz Literature Prize. He teaches in the writing program at the University of Arizona.

Joan Silber received the PEN/Ernest Hemingway Award for her first novel, *Household Words* (Viking, 1980). A second novel, *In The City*, was published this year by Viking. She has received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She teaches fiction writing at Sarah Lawrence College and lives in New York.

POETRY

Charles Baxter teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit and lives in Ann Arbor. He has published two collections of short stories, *Harmony of the*

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World (University of Missouri Press), and *Through the Safety Net* (Viking). He is working on a novel.

Lavina Blossom has published poetry in *The Literary Review* and previously in *The Paris Review*. She lives in southern California.

Douglas Crase is the author of *The Revisionist* (Little, Brown). He received a Whiting Writer's Award for Poetry in 1985.

Tim Dlugos lives in Manhattan. His most recent book of poems is *Entre Nous*. A new collection will be published this year by Hanuman Books.

Ian Ganassi lives in Manhattan and currently works as a technical writer. This is his first publication.

Peyton Houston is a poet and businessman who lives in Connecticut. His most recent book of poetry is *Arguments of Idea* (The Jargon Society, 1980).

Carolyn Kizer won the Pulitzer Prize in 1985 for her most recent poetry collection, *Yin* (Boa Editions). She teaches writing at Princeton University.

John Koethe's most recent collection is *The Late Wisconsin Spring* (Princeton University Press). He teaches philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "Mistral" is the 1986 winner of the Bernard F. Conners Poetry Prize.

J. Martin has poetry forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review* and *Shenandoah*.

William Matthews is Writer-in-Residence at City College of New York. Houghton Mifflin will publish his second book of poems, *Foreseeable Futures*, this spring.

Laura Mullen's poetry has appeared in *Ploughshares*, *The Sonora Review*, *The Denver Quarterly*, *Ironwood* (which awarded her its Stanford Prize in 1983), *Threepenny Review*, and elsewhere.

Eileen Myles's most recent book of poems was *Sappho's Boat* (Little Caesar, 1982). A collection of her short stories is due to be published this spring by Hanuman Books. "Mad Pepper" is from a forthcoming collection, *The Real Drive*, to be published by Semiotext. She lives in New York.

Ron Padgett is the translator of Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Poet Assassinated and Other Stories* (North Point) and the editor of Edwin Denby's *Complete Poems* (Random House). He is a recent recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. His book *Light As Air* (Burton/Skiva), a collaboration with the painter Alex Katz, will be published this spring.

Molly Peacock recently won an Ingram Merrill Award. She is the author of two books of poems, *And Live Apart* (University of Missouri Press, 1980) and *Raw Heaven* (Random House, 1984).

Hugh Seidman's books include *Collecting Evidence*, *Blood Lord*, and *Throne/Falcon/Eye*. He lives in New York and teaches at the New School.

Charles Simic's *Selected Poems 1963–1983* was published in 1985. His twelfth book of poems, *Unending Blues*, appeared in the fall of 1986.

Eleanor Ross Taylor is the author of three books of poetry, including *New and Selected Poems* (Stuart Wright). Her work has appeared in *Shenan-*

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doah, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *The New Yorker*. She lives in Charlottesville, Virginia.
Baron Wormser's second book of poems, *Good Trembling*, was published in 1986. He lives with his family in Mercer, Maine.

INTERVIEWS

Edward Hirsch is the author of two books of poetry, *For the Sleepwalkers* (Knopf, 1981), and *Wild Gratitude* (Knopf, 1986), which won the 1986 National Book Award for poetry.
Tom Teicholz is a writer and attorney in New York. He is a contributing editor of *Interview*, and his work has appeared in *New York Woman*, *Channels*, and *The Forward*. He is currently at work on a book about the John Demjanjuk trial for St. Martin's Press.

ART

Picasso's (1881–1973) artwork also appeared in issues 5, 7, and 26 of *The Paris Review*. An interview with him appeared in issue 32. **James Barron** is an art dealer with Jan Krugier Fine Art in New York. **Jan Krugier** has been a gallery director in Geneva and New York since 1962.
Myron Stout was born in Denton, Texas, in 1908. He currently lives in Provincetown, Massachusetts. A major retrospective exhibition of his paintings and drawings was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1980.

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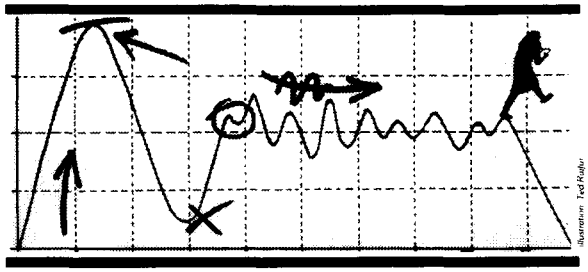

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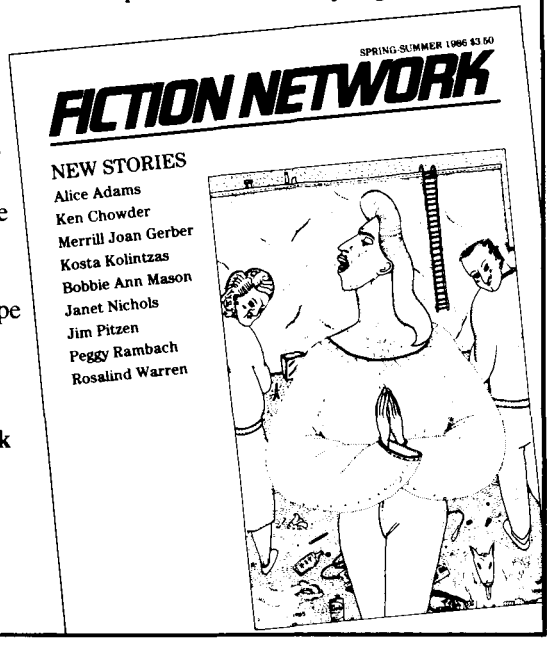

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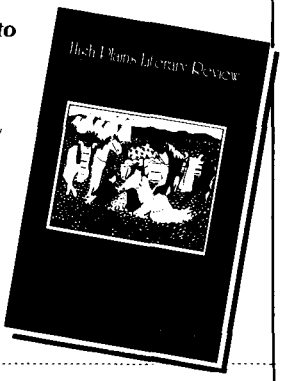

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